

OH, WHAT A PLAGUE IS LOVE!



By

KATHARINE TYNAN



ME
102

Olive Percival

HER BOOK

THE DOWN-HYL CLAIM



THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

OH, WHAT A PLAGUE IS LOVE!



Oh,
What a Plague is Love!

BY

KATHARINE TYNAN

(Mrs. H. A. Hinkson)

AUTHOR OF 'THE DEAR IRISH GIRL,' 'THE HANDSOME BRANDONS,'
'SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY,' ETC.

CHICAGO

A. C. M'CLURG & CO.

1900



4790
H 3 6-

CHAPTER I

CHARLES FREDERICK MARMADUKE STRANGWAYS, commonly called 'Duke' by his friends, had been for years a cause of anxiety to his steady-going, irreproachable family. There had been many times when one or other of his sons or daughters, in a fit of discouragement, had declared wearily that they despaired of his ever settling down; and indeed Duke was incurably erratic. Men who had been his contemporaries pottered about their gardens in summer, and were content with the easy-chair by the chimney-nook in winter. They were grandfathers long since, but Duke's children gave no sign of making him a grandfather. Handsome Miss Frances was a confirmed spinster; Sophia was tending the same way; and people often wondered

I

I

if charming milkmaid Dolly would also shut up her roses and wither quietly on her stalk. Duke's children laid this celibacy to his account. They were so busy unravelling the tangles of their father's love affairs that they had had no time for any of their own.

There was nothing senile or undignified about Duke's affairs of the heart. He usually paid his attentions where they were heartily welcome, for Duke had 'a way with him.' He had a cherubic youthfulness and innocence of aspect. The bloom of his cheeks owed nothing to the rouge-pot. His soft silvery hair was quite beautiful ; and though he was careful about his dress, he never suggested the old beau. Duke had not led an open-air life for nothing, and he walked very nearly as erect and as steadily as one of his own boys.

His daughters had somewhere at the back of their minds a sneaking sympathy with the many women of all ages who had found Duke irresistible. The truth was that the old fellow was so thoughtful, so tender, so gentle of heart, that he appealed

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

strongly to women. He never seemed to feel that a woman was plain-looking or past her charming prime. His compliments brightened as many faded cheeks as damask ones, and he was as ready with his chivalrous little cares for the most neglected old spinster as for the regal young beauty.

Friends of the Strangways family often wondered the girls did not let him go his way and give them a stepmother. Often enough worldly wisdom would have dictated this course. There was Mrs. Mellor at the Pines, who any time these last ten years would gladly have taken Duke off their hands. The late Mr. Mellor had been something of a brute, but he had left his widow comfortably provided for, and she was a dear woman all her friends said. She did not even resent the resolute determination of Duke's daughters not to have her for a stepmother. Her little brougham was as much at their disposal as ever; she was as willing to be their chaperone to country balls and town gaieties as at any time within the last ten years.

It was too bad, said the neighbourhood,

that those blind girls would insist on standing in their own light and everybody else's in the matter of Mrs. Mellor.

The truth was that Duke's daughters had a queer conscience of their own about their father's re-marrying. Frances led the way in this, and the others followed.

'You are, of course, a miracle of freshness and activity, dear dad,' she would say to poor Duke. 'But you aren't young, dear, and it must be our duty to care for your old age. Mrs. Mellor might be almost your daughter, and she had much better take Sir James Simmons, whom she would have taken long ago if you had let her alone. You mustn't make the dear woman a nurse for your old age, dad.'

Duke always winced at such speeches ; and it was noticeable that his youngest daughter, Dolly, would at his wincing run and take his slender old hand in hers and rub it energetically against her rose-bud cheek. Yet Dolly was as strong as Frances in opposing his matrimonial designs.

His daughters all felt the pain of opposing him. Duke had a way of coming

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

home radiant with each new affair of the heart, and quite certain that now the dear girls would think he had done well. He explained away to himself with a persistent cheerfulness their opposition in the past. He invented this or that reason for it, always blinking his innocent old eyes at those painful speeches about his increasing years. Discouragement after discouragement did not prepare him the least bit in the world for future reverses. His daughters grumbled over the trials he put them through in forcing them to deny him aught he so much coveted as a wife. Anything short of that they would have given him, for they loved him dearly, and the very sweetness with which he allowed them to forbid his banns but increased their love.

Perhaps, sometimes, in the innermost privacy of his heart Duke sighed over the bonds imposed by his children, but their years of opposition to his re-marriage did not fray or fret the strong ties of love between him and them. He always parted from them a sadder man, perhaps, but not

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

a whit less loving. If there was a tender reproach in his kisses as he went away from Gardenhurst with his latest Eden in ruins about him, it was a reproach expressed no other way. His children always carried their victories in the end by appealing to his fatherly love for them. When they joined in working this tender lever Duke gave in.

‘I can only give up what I conceive would be a happiness for me,’ he had said numberless times, ‘since it seems to threaten the happiness of my dear children.’

After such scenes there would be a lull for a time, and Gardenhurst would settle down to its peaceful avocations, while Duke solaced his wounded heart in Paris or at some gay watering-place.

Duke was the squire of his Kentish village, but he carried his squirehood lightly. All the serious duties he delegated to his son Arthur, who was a barrister, and usually inhabited a set of chambers in Pump Court. Arthur and the very efficient bailiff, Mr. Crosskey, kept things in such trim that the squire

could lead his butterfly life without any injury to his estate. The future squire, Hubert, was a Fellow of his College at Oxford, and lived there by preference. Hubert was a wise man on various abstruse matters, but could not tell wheat from barley, or lea from fallow land. Then there was Fred, a school-boy at Eton, who was a special pet of Mrs. Mellor's, and whom she delighted in spoiling.

Now, if Duke got on badly with any member of his family, it was Arthur. The 'getting on badly' was indeed only evinced by a punctiliousness in his treatment of his second son that was absent from his fond relations with his other children. Duke was never quite happy with Arthur in the house, though he went out of his way to show the young man deference and consideration whenever he put in an appearance at Gardenhurst. On such occasions Arthur would put his father through the most tiresome inquisition about his temporal affairs, insisting on his understanding the details Duke had gladly taken for granted, and quite remorseless over holding him to

that long morning's work in the study, when the affairs of the estate were thoroughly gone into. Duke used to emerge from these consultations tired, and, as far as it was in him to be, irritable.

But it was not this overweening sense of duty, as he conceived it, which made the fret with Duke. It was that Arthur never seemed to take him seriously. Arthur was a spare, legal-looking young gentleman, with a great deal of humour in the lines about his acute lips, and in the twinkle of his eyes. 'Damn the fellow's humour!' Duke had said to himself often; 'why the devil should he make me the object of it?' And it was too true that Arthur, out of business hours, never looked at his father without a quiver of the face that suggested some exquisite joke.

Poor Duke; it was really a trial to one who, despite his many love affairs, was still quite dignified. The worst of it was that he could not make a quarrel over it. The laughter was there, latent but unexpressed. Every one felt it, yet it seemed too impalpable to quarrel about.

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

The Strangways were a most devoted family. Yet over and over one or other of his sisters had expressed in pretty forcible language the irritation this attitude of Arthur's towards 'the dad' caused them. Arthur often laughed at themselves, but the laughter left no sting. Dolly and Arthur were great chums, but even to Dolly it was a little uncomfortable when her brother's home-coming occurred while her father also was a welcome guest. For it must be confessed that Duke was so nomadic in his habits that one could never quite feel that his house was his home.

He had a resting-place for the sole of his foot in most of the pleasant watering-places in England. At Torquay and Bournemouth, at Harrogate and Brighton, there were obsequious landladies who knew Mr. Strangways' tastes thoroughly, and who were prepared at any time to evict a less popular tenant from the sea-looking or southern-aspect rooms Duke always occupied. His lodgings were indeed as numerous as his love affairs, and there were as many landladies to declare

him the perfect gentleman as there were widows and spinsters in the world who kept a kindly memory of him in their hearts. It was a remarkable thing that Duke always escaped from his love entanglements with peace and honour, so that to him the memory of his many *amourettes* was as though he turned over a book full of pressed rose leaves.

Between Dolly and Arthur many conversations occurred on the score of the dad.

‘Will he ever range himself, do you think, Doll?’ Arthur would inquire, looking dreamily at the rings blown from his cigar.

‘If you mean will he ever grow to be a snuffy old gentleman like Mr. Mayne or Captain Philbrick,’ Dolly would reply with latent irritation, ‘I don’t believe he ever will. He will remain just the same charming, considerate, tender-hearted, dear old dad to the very end.’

‘When are you going to let him make Mrs. Mellor happy?’ Arthur remarked on one of these occasions, with the odious

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

sparkle of his eye growing brighter and more glancing.

‘Oh, I don’t think the dad will marry now, you know,’ said Dolly. ‘I think he is really giving up the idea.’

‘Not a bit of it, my dear. He gets sprucer every time I see him, and he did fetch those two Miss Fairfords at Sir James Bruce’s. Much better let him marry Mrs. Mellor. Then you’ll know what you’re being let in for. If you girls don’t practise a little common prudence in the case of the dad, I foresee a young stepmother for you and a house full of kids.’

‘Arthur!’ cried his offended sister, turning very red. ‘I don’t think you should say such things. You are so disagreeable over the dad, and have never yet appreciated the qualities that every one likes so in him. He can’t help it if women want to marry him. I’m not surprised at even young and pretty women finding him pleasanter than the conceited, sneering young men one knows. He is so well-bred, poor dear.’

Arthur laughed provokingly.

‘Meaning I’m not. But what about Fairfax, Dolly? He too must be numbered among the young men.’

Dolly waved away the impertinent question superbly.

‘Let us keep to the matter in hand, please. When are you going to learn to treat your father properly? You have a flippant manner towards him none of us like.’

Arthur fanned himself with a Japanese fan he had picked up from the grass. This conversation occurred in delightful June weather, and Arthur had run down to see the Gardenhurst roses in bloom.

‘Dear old Doll!’ he said with lazy affection, and then began to whistle a tune from ‘Don Giovanni,’ that in which Leperello recites the amours of his master. His sister caught his meaning immediately, and flashed a look of resentment at him.

‘I see it’s no use talking to you,’ she said; ‘but it’s not well-bred all the same.’

The young man got up from his chair and stretched himself.

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

‘Well, *au revoir*, my dear, I’m off to the Pines to see Mrs. Mellor. I hope I’ll find you in a better temper when I return. Any message? No! Well, good-bye, my child, and I’m determined, if you foolish people won’t let the dad reward Mrs. Mellor’s long and romantic devotion to him, I’ll reward it by asking her myself.’

‘Oh, she wouldn’t decline on *you*,’ said his sister, her face relaxing its sternness. ‘Not so jolly likely, after knowing the dad.’

‘There!’ said the young man as he whistled for the dogs to accompany him on his walk. ‘It’s no wonder the old man considers himself irresistible. If he makes such slaves of his own womenkind he may well be confident about others. And with your sex, my dear sister, a man’s confidence in his own power is the strong motive force.’

‘If that were true, then *you’d* be all-conquering,’ said his sister.

‘A cheap gibe!’ he answered, and then, as he turned away, fired his last shot.

‘I shouldn’t mind wagering you ten to one, any way you like to take it, that the dad is at this moment up to some of his little games. You haven’t heard from him since I came, and his silence, like a spoilt child’s, shows he’s engaged in some engrossing mischief.’

He strolled away as he spoke to avoid his sister’s indignant disclaimer.

‘As if I should go making wagers with you, you wretch, over the dear old dad !’

How many conversations like this there had been between the pair, and how often Dolly had vowed never again to ‘rise’ to the bait, and had broken that vow ! She snapped off a thread in her dainty piece of work viciously as she looked after the tall form of her brother, now crossing the meadow with leisurely hands in his pockets and the dogs at his heels.

‘I could not have believed,’ she said to herself, ‘that a sense of humour could be so irritating a thing. I often feel as if I should like him better if he were as solemn as an owl and as dull as ditch-water.’

She folded up her piece of work care-

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

fully, and entered the house by the French window of the drawing-room, looking so animated after her little burst that it was a thousand pities Andrew Fairfax could not have seen her then.

CHAPTER II

THE tea had just been carried out on the Gardenhurst lawn. The table was set under the shade of a branching elm, all the leaves of which were dancing in the merry June air. The house stood over yonder behind its thickets of roses, a charming old gabled house, very old-fashioned within and without. The drawing-room was panelled in white wood, decorated with mazy rose garlands, according to the taste of a Mrs. Strangways in the last century. The dining-room kept its heavy oak beams in the white ceiling, and upstairs in the bedrooms, under the pointed roof, the beams hung so low that one had to stoop to pass below them. Londoners raved over Gardenhurst, and it was indeed a kindly, comfortable old house, where insidious modern conveniences had been added so

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

quietly and deftly that one detected no incongruity in their presence. Londoners always said that Gardenhurst smelt of lavender and rose leaves.

Under the elm-tree the three ladies of Gardenhurst sat in comfortable low chairs. Dolly was still lazily sewing her seam ; Sophia, the energetic, was resting after a morning of superintending the making of jam in the kitchen ; Frances was sitting before the tea-tray, with its furnishing of old brown and purple china, and its substantial toast and sandwiches and hot buttered cakes.

Arthur lay full length on a rug on the grass, his hands clasped under his head, and his eyes staring into the world of leaves above him. He liked his comforts, this young gentleman, and stoutly refused to lie on the grass so long as there was a rug in Gardenhurst.

‘ You, my dear sisters,’ he had said, ‘ are used to earwigs in your hair and ears and down your backs, and I’ve no doubt rather enjoy it than otherwise, whereas I, being a mere Londoner, would scream at

the sight of a black-beetle, and faint at a slug.'

The Misses Strangways vouchsafed him no answer. Arthur found that his sisters did not readily rise to his gibes unless they were connected with his father.

'Two lumps of sugar, my dear Frances,' he said, in reply to a question, 'and plenty of cream. Mrs. Mellor thinks I have a regular London colour and require dainties to bring the roses to my cheeks.'

'Mrs. Mellor knows as well as we do that your complexion was always sallow and ill-looking,' said Dolly, nonchalantly.

'How strange!' replied the youth. 'I have noticed that Fairfax often regards me with a dreamy gaze. It never struck me before that it was because my colour reminded him of yours.'

Every one laughed, because Dolly's milk and roses were as unlike as anything could be to her brother's colourless cheeks.

'You should have plucked currants for me this morning as I asked you,' said Sophia, severely. 'Then the sun might really have brought out some roses, if they

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

were only yellow ones, for you to take back to London.'

Frances lifted her hand.

'Hush, children!' she said. 'The dogs are barking as if for an arrival. Who can it be?'

'Dad,' said Sophia. 'I've dreamt of him three nights running.'

'It is surely the dad,' said Arthur, solemnly. 'And now, Dolly, what way will you take it?'

But Dolly was looking towards the house eagerly, and before she had noticed her brother's impudent challenge, there, sure enough, was Duke himself lightly stepping across the lawn. He was in a gray summer suit, with a moss-rose in the lapel of his coat, and, despite his frosty hair, he looked pleasantly fresh and vigorous.

There were a few moments of rapturous embraces from his daughters, accompanied by frantic demonstrations from the dogs, who had come leaping about him across the lawn. So for a few minutes he did not notice the lazy young gentleman on the grass. When he did, a little shadow fell

on the brightness of his face. There was a distinct effort in the cheeriness of his.

‘Hullo, Arthur, my boy! When did you come down?’

‘Ha!’ said the astute youth in his heart, ‘the dad’s plans are put out by my presence. He comes with a fresh revelation. What a score that I dropped down here in time for it!’

Duke took his cup of tea from Frances’s hand, and allowed his other daughters to attend to him with their accustomed fondness. He was down from town, and had a good deal to say of this and that function and of the distinguished people he had met. Duke was evidently much in request, and had as fresh a faculty for making and delighting in new friends as when his hair was golden.

Still under all the chatter he was uneasy. Arthur had sunk back on the grass in his old position, and under his tilted cap his eyes gleamed in so narrow a line that he might have been asleep. But his father was uneasily conscious of that line, and that the eyes between the narrowed lids were

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

shrewdly regarding himself. Perhaps it was the vexation which those eyes caused him that at length spurred him to action. Arthur watched the dad's spirit getting up, though to all appearance he was extracting the last vestige of sap from the grass-blade he was sucking.

‘Good old boy!’ said the youth. ‘He’s bucking up. Doesn’t forget that he belongs to a race of soldiers.’

By this time Phyllis, the rosy-cheeked upper housemaid, had removed the tea-table, and the little circle had settled down for conversation. Duke cleared his throat once or twice nervously, though his lips were tight under his white moustache.

‘Dear children!’ he began, ‘and you, Arthur’—it was a subtle difference which no one seemed to notice—‘I am so glad to find you all together to-day, because I want to talk to you about something that most intimately concerns myself.’

At this point Arthur opened his eyes, and looked hard at his father with what he called himself ‘his Old Bailey eye.’ Many a hardy witness had been brought by it to utter

confusion. It made his father wince, as he knew it would, and Dolly blushed hotly in the midst of her curiosity. She looked down at the sleek brown head on the rug indignantly. 'If you could only know,' she said to herself, 'how *beastly* it is of you!' It was strong language for the gently-nurtured Dolly Strangways, but she had picked up her brother's schoolboy slang, and it often seemed to fit in with her moods better than more conventional language.

Perhaps Arthur had seen his father wince, and felt for a moment the cruelty of it. At least his eyes had closed languidly, and there was now no steely glitter under the rim of the cap.

'My dears,' went on Duke, 'you are good children, none better. And yet, since your dear mother's death, my life has been lonely. I think in my case there is a special necessity for a woman's companionship'—he lifted his hand to silence the protestations of his girls. 'I mean in that most intimate friendship and companionship that a wife alone can give. My dears, I have consented for years to bear this loneliness,

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

because my dear girls, for one reason or another, did not seem to see the matter in my light. But now, my dears, I seem to see before me a chance of the greatest happiness, a happiness which I feel sure my dear ones will not deny me. I have reason to believe that I am acceptable to a very charming lady—one of birth, beauty, virtue, and accomplishments, one who, I feel sure, would adorn this dear circle, and make a delightful friend for my girls,—he broke down rather lamely.

‘Who is this lady?’ asked Frances, coldly.

Poor Duke looked about him with a bewildered sense of the chill in the air. Sophia was looking sullen; even pretty Dolly was stabbing her seam viciously; Arthur had turned over on his face, and there was no revelation of what he might be thinking in his broad shoulders and his close-cropped head.

‘My dears,’ he began again pleadingly. ‘Don’t set yourselves against me till you know more. The lady’s name is Beatrice Challoner. She is the daughter of a brave soldier, and comes from a long line of dis-

tinguished and honourable people. She is poor, my dears, and living a very lonely life at Mrs. Brown's boarding-house in Kensington, where I met her. My girls would not care for her less because she is poor and lonely and very proud. You must know her, my dears, before you reject her. I have said nothing to her until I had first told my dear children. Believe me,' said Duke, stretching out his hands to them, 'she is everything to honour and love. She is a most high-minded, accomplished, and beautiful young lady.'

A thrill passed through his audience, and a simultaneous exclamation of '*Young!*' came from three pairs of lips. Arthur showed no sign. There was a little heaving of his shoulders, that was all; but no one was thinking of Arthur.

'Dad, dear,' began Frances, 'you speak of a *young* lady. Am I to understand that you propose to place a young woman over me and my sisters? I am no longer very young, and I must confess it would be very bitter to me to yield up the place I have occupied since my mother's death.'

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

What Duke would have answered can never be known, for suddenly the quiet figure on the grass rolled over, exhibiting a face purple with suppressed laughter. 'Oh, Lord, *young*, a *young* lady!' spluttered Arthur, amidst his peals of laughter. He struggled somehow to his feet and leant against the bole of the elm, struggling with his mirth. Peal after peal of laughter issued from his lips, mingled with 'Oh, dad, you'll kill us. You're perfectly incurable, you know. Oh, good Lord, a *young* lady, think of it!'

Duke started forward, his face turning very red and then a little pale.

'Why, you confounded young jackanapes!' he began, furiously. 'How dare you, sir? I say, sir, stop that idiotic laughter, or, confound you, sir, I'll make you.'

The Misses Strangways leaped to their feet. They had never seen their father so angry before, and they were shocked at the unseemly conduct of their brother. However, the young gentleman ended the scene himself. He dabbed his streaming eyes with his pocket-handkerchief, vaulted lightly

over the garden seat beside which he was leaning, and vanished into the house. Echoes of his delighted exclamations and laughter came back to them on the breeze; and, judging from the sounds from within the drawing-room, he was engaged in stifling his mirth with a sofa-cushion, while his feet drummed vigorously on the old damask roses of the settee.

After this all organised opposition on the part of the Misses Strangways was impossible. They spent the afternoon coaxing and soothing Duke's ruffled feelings. Arthur did not reappear, and just before the dressing-bell Dolly went into the house to give him, as she expressed it to herself, a bit of her mind. She did not find him, as she expected, lying on his bed reading a novel. On the contrary he was just closing his portmanteau. He turned to his sister with an audacious smile.

‘Well, Doll, I’m taking myself off. I won’t stay to assist you in putting the dad off his girl. He won’t be happy while I’m here, or till he gets her, probably, so I’m off on the 6.45.’

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

‘And the best thing you could do,’ said his sister, severely. ‘You’ve done enough mischief as it is. You’ve not only offended the dad, and behaved, I can’t help saying it, like a bounder, but you’ve put us in the position that we can’t give the dad a talking to as we should have done only for your most unfortunate presence and behaviour. He’s so sore that we can only try to make him forget how rude you’ve been.’

‘Drive out one nail by driving in another,’ suggested the youth, flippantly, as he strapped the portmanteau. ‘Have over Mrs. Mellor this evening, and get the dad married to her by special licence to-morrow morning. Old Rayner would manage it to save the scandal of dad’s marrying a girl.’

‘We don’t want your advice, Arthur. We’ll manage our affairs without you in future. Allow me to say that I’m glad you’ve the decency to go.’

‘Thank you, my dear. I’ve had delightful entertainment during my visit. Write and tell me how you’ve succeeded

with the dad. Any message to Fairfax? Your love? No? Well, don't get so red over it. Keep your blushes for our learned friend himself. He'll appreciate them.'

Duke's daughters soon found that Arthur's behaviour that unfortunate afternoon had broken the back of their opposition. For a day or two their father sunned himself in the love with which they surrounded him, every act of which was an unspoken reparation. For a day or two they heard no more of Miss Challoner. Then one evening Duke returned to the charge. He was very gentle and eminently reasonable, and he had a way of making each of his girls feel that on her especially he rested in love and confidence. He made no reference to the scene with Arthur. Quite unexpectedly he announced his return to London the next day.

'I want one of you to return with me,' he said, 'and enjoy a few days of town. I've written to Mrs. Brown for a room, and she'll keep it, though the place is unreasonably crowded just now. I should like you, my dear girls, to know Miss

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

Challoner. Even if she is never to stand to me in a closer relationship—and indeed it may well be that I am over-presumptuous in thinking such youth and beauty would stoop to me—still I should like to win my girls' friendship for a very lonely girl.'

He said it with such a pathetic dignity that it brought tears to the impressionable eyes of his daughters. Perhaps after all Arthur was not far out when he had chuckled over his father's cunning. It was surprising how the opposition had crumbled. The Misses Strangways felt vaguely that they had been weak after they had consented that one of their number should accompany their father to London. After a little discussion it was decided that Dolly should be that one, and in the morning the elder sisters assisted her to pack her pretty frocks.

'Mind, Dolly,' said Sophia, who was the strong-minded one, 'don't be won over too much by that girl. We've been weak with the dad, but we were forced into a position in which we couldn't be

unhandsome to him. But, all the same, we don't mean to accept Miss Beatrice Challoner as a stepmother.'

'Yes, dear,' added Frances, 'be very sensible ; and even if she is as charming as the dad says, don't form one of your impulsive friendships with her—at least not till you've found out whether she means to take the dad or not.'

But Dolly was wondering more about the chances of seeing Andrew Fairfax than thinking of Miss Challoner and her father. All the same she assured her sisters with fervour that she would be very prudent, as prudent as Sophia herself would be.

'No, you won't, my dear,' said Sophia, promptly.

Dolly went off the next morning, looking, in her pink print frock and white hat, the incarnation of dewy freshness. The two elder sisters kissed her with pride and fondness. In their kind hearts they were glad of the outing for her.

'I tell you what, Frances,' said Sophia, resolutely, after the dog-cart had driven off, 'we mustn't let that child wither among

the Kentish roses. Dolly's not cut out for an independent woman like you or me. Dolly *must* marry.'

'Yes,' assented the elder sister. 'Dolly ought to marry. Perhaps after she comes back we should ask Arthur to bring that pleasant young Fairfax for a week or two. He might often run down from Saturday to Monday.'

CHAPTER III

ARTHUR had been back in town a week, and had heard nothing of how the opposition to the Challoner match, as he called it, had been going. He felt that his sisters had put him in the corner like a naughty little boy, but that fact did not depress him. His enjoyment of the episode had not passed ; and over and over again he had recalled the events of his last afternoon at Gardenhurst, usually ending up by a fit of laughter that very much astonished the dignified, half-bred Persian tabby who was the companion of his few solitary hours.

Arthur went out a good deal, and it was now the height of the London season, when events, lest they should be overtaken by the end, jostled and tumbled over each other through the golden June day and night. Not many *habitués* of Pump Court

had a mantel-piece so heavily bestrewn with invitation cards as Mr. Arthur Strangways. He was popular, and especially with the dowagers. When this fact was alluded to in his presence, he acknowledged it in a slightly shamefaced manner, ascribing it to his worldly wisdom rather than to any natural gifts or graces with which he was favoured. But the dowagers could have told otherwise. Mrs. Mellor had said, rebuking him once for his pose as Mr. Worldly Wiseman, that he was not the son of the most charming man of his day for nothing.

‘Pooh, my lad,’ the still fair and dimpled widow had said, softly patting the young fellow’s cheek, ‘we women like you because under your impudence we find something of the graciousness which has made three generations of us adore Duke Strangways. Not that you’ll ever be like him—don’t imagine it! He’s the fine flower of good manners, and you’re but a decent lad with an inherited pleasantness. So don’t give yourself airs over what I say.’

‘My dear lady,’ replied the unabashed

son of his father, 'if I could believe what you say, I'd risk everything and ask you to become Mrs. Arthur Strangways.'

'No, you wouldn't, Impudence,' said the lady, highly diverted; 'and if you did, you'd promptly find yourself refused. Besides, I'd cut you off, from motives of propriety, from your frequent visits here and all the petting I can give you now as being old enough to be your mother.'

There was no doubt that Mrs. Mellor was largely responsible for the spoiling of Arthur Strangways. There was an unspoken bond of affection between the two, though they nearly always talked to each other in a jesting way. Be sure Mrs. Mellor did not think less well of the young fellow because she knew that he, for one, would be glad to see her installed as his father's wife. Fond as she was of the girls, she could not help feeling at times a little indignant over the stupidity of their attitude as regarded herself.

Arthur had come in in the small hours after a reception and a big ball. He turned over the accumulation of his letters

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

languidly. Then his face brightened as though he had come upon one in his sweetheart's handwriting. But he was quite fancy-free, and the bold writing was that of his sister Dolly. He and Dolly had loved each other faithfully from the cradle, though he had teased Dolly, and she had resented it ever since he could remember.

‘Sweet old Doll,’ he said aloud, laughing, ‘she has come round and forgiven me.’

He opened the letter, and read it through, giving a low whistle of surprise now and again. The letter ran :—

ALBURY HOUSE, KENSINGTON,

29th June.

MY DEAR OLD ARTHUR—I think you were very bad the last time I saw you, but of course as usual it is I who have to come round, and you who will not say you are sorry. I came back to town with the dad a few days after you left, and have been enjoying some of the gaieties, though it would have been pleasanter if you could have shared them. However, Miss Challoner goes everywhere with us. She is not at all what we could have supposed her to be, and I think it unlikely she would marry an old man. But she is

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

not easy to know. I daresay you will be surprised to find me good friends with her, but you have yourself to thank for it. Even Sophia could say nothing after you had pained the dear old dad so much, but only try to make him forget that his son *could* behave so. Would you like me to come to your rooms one evening? for of course you would not care to come here; and I should not like to leave town without seeing my dear old Arthur.—Ever your loving

DOLL.

‘Poor little Doll!’ said the young man to himself. ‘What a transparent child it is! She is half ashamed of her weakness, and a little bit inclined to rub it into me. The dad has bamboozled them all once more. And then the child wants to come here in the simple expectation that Fairfax may be here as well. Well, so he shall be. It’s doing a good turn for old Andrew too.’

He turned the letter over.

‘Hullo, the usual feminine postscript, in the most unlikely corner!’

He read it over once or twice.

‘The Lyceum to-morrow night. That means the dad will have a box. And

dinner at the Criterion. I'm hanged if I won't turn up and inspect the fair Beatrice for myself. I'll be able to tell in a brace of shakes whether she'll oust my dear Mrs. Mellor or not. Begad, if the dad comes through this I'll see that he makes Mrs. Mellor Mrs. Strangways, or die for it. I believe he likes the little woman better than all the boarding-house adventuresses in London, if those idiotic girls would only see the matter in its proper light. Dinner at the Criterion. That means 7 o'clock. If they haven't room for me I can dine at another table, and the dad can't refuse me a back seat in the box. I'll do it. It's playing it low on the dad to spoil his love-making, but it's for his good, poor old boy. I'll make it up to him presently with Mrs. Mellor.'

The next evening Duke, looking more distinguished than any ducal personage in England, was sitting opposite his daughter and Miss Challoner at a little table near one of the windows in a big dining saloon of the Criterion. Outside was the exhilarating life and commotion of Piccadilly

Circus in June. Within all was gaiety and sparkle. Folk in evening dress were at every table, and there was a buzz of conversation broken by the popping of champagne corks and the busy clatter of knives and forks. Dolly, that country rosebud, was enjoying it highly. She looked so joyous with her blue eyes shining and her red lips smiling, that a good many people passing to and fro through the crowded rooms turned to look at her as at something very pleasant.

Suddenly she uttered an exclamation brightly and then turned grave. Duke looked at her.

‘What is it, my dear?’

‘There is Arthur, dads. He hasn’t seen us yet. Yes, he has ; he’s coming this way now.’

Beatrice Challoner, looking with languid kindness at her host, saw his eyes cloud and a little shadow fall on his beaming face. She felt vaguely sorry for an instant. Then Duke rose up, and held out his hand to the tall young fellow approaching. He spoke cordially enough, but his tone seemed a little forced.

‘Can’t find a table, my boy? But there’s plenty of room here. Allow me to introduce my boy, Arthur, Miss Challoner.’

Beatrice Challoner looked up in her queenly way, as ready to be gracious to Arthur Strangways as to any other human being. She was not greatly interested in young men. One of the race had too thoroughly disillusioned her, and when she had got over her heart-sickness of disillusionment it left her with a somewhat unjust depreciation of young men as a class.

Young Strangways had not glanced at her, and unfortunately, just as she lifted her faintly smiling eyes to his face, she intercepted a meaning look which was intended for his sister Dolly. Miss Challoner was a clever and impulsive young woman. Somehow she divined what that impudent look really meant. The blood rushed to her heart as it ebbed away from her cheeks. She had a sudden, amazed comprehension of the attitude of this young man’s mind towards her.

Arthur meanwhile had turned to inspect

her with lazy curiosity. What he had expected to see was a hard, handsome young woman, not over-fresh after long experience of London boarding-houses, not over-scrupulous as to the age of the man she would marry, if marriage were the golden key to open to her the doors of rank, wealth, ease, and social distinction. What he saw was a girl of twenty-three or twenty-four, with a delicate and disdainful face, dark hair coiled low on her neck, and large gray eyes that were now looking at him with a light which was anything but friendly.

The young man showed his discomfiture by the muttered exclamation with which he took the seat opposite to her. Dolly saw and heard, and smiled maliciously. She felt it good that Arthur should be snuffed out for once in a way. He was too disconcerted to turn the batteries of his humour on the dad : that in itself was an unrelieved blessing.

Duke was quick to discover that his son was for some reason or other not in his usual mocking mood ; and having dis-

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

covered it he forgot all about him as soon as possible. Miss Challoner looked in Arthur's direction no more after the first haughty inclination of her head. He felt with a queer sensation of irritation that she was very well satisfied indeed with his father's attentions. Duke was radiant, and outdid himself in sweetness and amiability. Beside him Arthur was uneasily conscious that he appeared stupid and unready. That girl over there had non-plussed him out of his usual humorous ease.

The dinner concluded without Miss Challoner having once spoken to him or looked in his direction. Dolly had chattered a good deal of where she had been and what she had seen, but he had not responded with his usual brightness. From feeling snubbed at first he had begun to feel bad-tempered, and Arthur was one of the good-tempered people with a quite unexpected streak of nasty temper somewhere hidden in him.

When the two girls had gone to put on their cloaks, Duke turned to the young fellow with an affable forgetfulness of past

offences. 'You are coming on with us, my lad? Inconvenience us? Not a bit of it. There are chairs for four, and Ellen Terry is very fine in the new piece, they say.'

Arthur could have found it in his heart to refuse, but he had a stinging curiosity to see more of the girl, and a curious angry desire to make her turn those starry eyes on himself. He had not been accustomed to be treated so carelessly, and the novelty was unpleasant.

He answered his father easily. 'Thanks, dad, I think I'll come. I've nothing special on to-night.'

To himself he said, as he stood there a little rigid in his attitude—

'Far better go to Lady Di's, and dance with the pretty fair-haired Campion girl who appreciates you. Then your devil may go to sleep for another hundred years.'

You see Arthur Strangways was more conscious than any one else in the world of that little ugly streak of temper in him. Whenever it came to life it was himself it fretted. He had a sufficiently strong will

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

to fume in silence, but the beast worried him the more for that.

The girls came in with their white and gold cloaks much alike—alike enough, at least, to deceive the untrained masculine eye into thinking them much alike. As they went down the wide stairs Dolly slipped her hand through her brother's arm. Perhaps she divined his ruffled feelings. Perhaps she only wanted to hear something of Andrew Fairfax, and went circling about her as yet unauthorised love as carefully as a bird about its concealed nest.

Duke and Miss Challoner had preceded them, and when they reached the pavement it was in time to see two hansoms draw up in obedience to the whistle of the commissioner.

‘Two hansoms!’ muttered the disgusted young man. ‘Damn it! I call it vulgar. It is after the manner of loving couples in Brixton and Camberwell. I *did* think the dad good form in spite of his confounded folly.’

But Dolly clapped her hands with

delight. A hansom ride was always delightful to her, and she settled down for the short distance blissfully.

Matters did not improve during the progress of the play. Arthur sat uncomfortably where he could only see by craning his neck. He did not indeed try to see. Miss Challoner's creamy shoulder and proud head filled all his thoughts. So insistent did his desire to make her speak to him or look at him become, that he addressed her pointedly at last. She swept him with a superb gaze, and answered him in monosyllables. He sat back in his uncomfortable chair, biting his lip to keep his demon down.

He was furious by the time they left the theatre—furious with the girl, furious with what he called his father's fatuous happiness in the smiles that were lavished so sweetly upon him, furious with Dolly for enjoying it all so much and for insisting on waiting to the very last.

They left the theatre in the same order they had entered it. Duke got his fair charge out quickly, though the others were

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

hard on his heels. When his son and daughter emerged from the crowd he turned a radiant face upon them.

‘We must walk down a little way to our hansoms,’ he said ; ‘the man says we shall else have to wait a long time.’

‘Not in the same order, dad,’ the young man muttered viciously. ‘There’s been enough philandering for one evening, and it’s not decent.’

As they stood on the pavement there was some little shifting of places. The hansoms were driving up, Duke zealously signalling to them.

‘Dolly,’ whispered the young fellow into the pink ear nearest to him, ‘you go with the dad this time. We don’t want any more folly with this girl.’

There was a sudden flash of lovely, indignant eyes that scorched him like summer lightning. He blushed hotly with rage and shame. He stammered something, he knew not what, but the girl had looked away again contemptuously. In a minute she had laid her hand lightly on his father’s arm, and had sprung into the hansom. Duke

followed her, and it flashed off through the darkness.

Arthur assisted Dolly miserably into the second hansom which had now drawn up. He felt altogether crushed and wretched over his mistake.

‘Oh, Doll, Doll,’ he groaned, ‘why in the name of all the devils do you and that girl wear cloaks exactly alike?’

Dolly looked at him in bewilderment, seeing which he laughed out, a laugh without mirth.

His sister had apparently no idea of the *bêtise* he had committed.

CHAPTER IV

ON a fine afternoon of the following week Arthur Strangways was moving about restlessly in his sitting-room, taking up things and putting them down again, altering the position of a vase of flowers or a book or a photograph, in a manner which showed him to be ill at ease. The room was long and low, with deep window-seats and wide doors. The windows looked into a lofty elm, the branches of which still waved in spring lightness and freshness. In those branches there was a prodigious chattering of married birds. The room was distinctly pleasant. There were pictures on the walls between panels of old tapestry. The grate was lined with Delft tiles representing Scripture stories. There were roses everywhere : on the mantel-shelf, and in the many ' pots ' about the room, which

bore witness to the cricketing and rowing prowess of Arthur Strangways ; on the American desk, more useful than beautiful, with its multitude of drawers and pigeon-holes ; on the long table among the papers, which were pushed together in a heap to make room for a dainty tea equipage, flanked by piles of strawberries.

Mr. Strangways had half-shamefacedly taken a good deal of trouble to make this special room pretty to-day, while retaining something of the litter and dust of masculine belongings which are an item of the feminine enjoyment in visiting chambers or college rooms. He was very fond of Dolly, but these preparations were not made for Dolly.

He had really suffered over his unfortunate *contretemps* with Beatrice Challoner. He had felt the brutality of his speech keenly, and had not been able to think on the matter without an intolerable loathing of himself. His bad temper had disappeared before his shame. At first he had had the feeling that he could not endure ever to see or hear of the girl again. Later a

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

little hope came to him that, given time and opportunity, he might make her see he was not the brute he must have seemed to her. He had usually been able to make it right with women, and why not with her, if he were very humble and very careful.

He had had some idea of writing an apology to her, but he had rejected it. He felt the thing did not bear touching upon in words. 'Hang it all,' he had said to himself in an access of hope, 'if the girl has any decency in her she'll know I'm heavily punished.'

It was in this mood that he boldly made the venture of asking her to come with his sister to tea in his rooms. The note he had written to her had had an unspoken appeal for pardon in every word. It was as deferential as though it were written to a queen.

'The girl couldn't look so majestic,' he argued with himself, 'without having some corresponding nobility of character. She can afford to be magnanimous, and she will read between the lines that I am squirming.'

But no answer had reached him from Miss Challoner, though Dolly had written

a delighted acceptance. He watched the posts till the last with a keenness that amazed himself. Then he had given up expecting a reply, and had gone through his work all that morning, with the conflicting arguments for her coming or not coming intruding between him and his parchments.

It was four o'clock when Andrew Fairfax ran lightly up the stairs and kicked at his friend's oak. Arthur noted with saturnine amusement the young fellow's eager glance about the room which took in the most shadowy corners. 'Does he think I've Doll hidden behind the screen, or below the tapestry?' he said to himself, with a resigned groan over the folly of lovers.

A little later came the dainty feminine knock which made his heart leap. He went to the door, afraid to meet the beauty he had offended, but yet more afraid not to meet her. He opened it slowly to give himself time. When it had opened he was conscious of a blank feeling of disappointment. There was only Dolly, fluttering in her light summer draperies. He drew

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

her in with affectionate welcome, and kissed her bright cheeks, with no sign of the disappointment he felt.

‘Come along, dear,’ he said, ‘the tea is just waiting to be made, and Fairfax is dying of thirst.’ He had a forlorn sense that now there was no other guest need be expected. However, he hoped his sister brought an explanation, an apology even of the most formal ; but Dolly, after her first rapturous blush at the sight of Andrew Fairfax, had settled down to chatter of everything in the world but that which he specially desired to know.

‘What an extravagant boy you are !’ she said, her hands fluttering over the scarlet strawberries, ‘to have all those piles of strawberries for just me, when I know they’re selling at a ruinous price.’

Arthur smiled grimly

‘You’ll spare a few, I daresay, for me and Fairfax, my dear, when you’ve quite satisfied your own greediness.’

Dolly prepared two plates of the fruit and added sugar and cream, and then, by way of reproach, handed the larger of the

two to her brother. The other she held out with a shy smile to the brawny, sandy-haired young giant who was straddling the rug before the fireplace, and looking as if he were already one of the blest.

‘It’s a thousand pities,’ muttered Arthur to himself, ‘that propriety won’t permit of my clearing out and leaving those young fools to themselves. I feel I’m deucedly in the way.’

He did the next best thing, for when tea was finished he went off to his desk with the excuse of having letters to write, and left the couple to converse together at the other end of the long, low room. They seemed to have a good deal to say to each other, and he threw himself into his letter-writing with a savage resolution to think no more of Miss Challoner and her treatment of him. His quill scratched away energetically while the long, golden afternoon went. He had accumulated quite a pile of letters before Dolly addressed him with an evident unwillingness.

‘Arthur, dear, I’m afraid I must be making tracks for South Kensington. Do

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

you know it's a quarter past six, and they dine at seven ?'

'Never mind Mrs. Brown's dinner-hour, dear. I'll stand you and Fairfax too, if he's disengaged, a dinner at Blanchard's. The dad will understand you're with me, eh, Doll ?'

'Oh, quite,' said the girl, radiantly. 'He said he wouldn't expect me till you brought me back. It was the very last thing he said when he left me at the foot of your staircase.'

'Oh, indeed, so the dad brought you to the foot of the stairs. Deuced unfatherly of him not to have come up with you.'

Dolly came closer and put a soft hand about his neck caressingly.

'You see, dear,' she said in a lowered voice, 'it wasn't his fault. I think he would have liked to come. But then Miss Challoner was with us, and when I suggested their coming up she seemed not to like the idea. I don't think you quite hit it off with her the other night.'

The young man laughed sharply.

'So it was Miss Challoner was the im-

pediment. No, Doll, you are quite right. I did not at all hit it off with her the other night.'

'I think you're unjust to her, dear. I can't help thinking we were all unjust to her.'

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

'It can't matter to her what we think. Come, Doll, dear, let us forget Miss Challoner, and think what we shall have for dinner. Are you going to join us, Fairfax?'

'Delighted !' answered the youth with obvious sincerity.

They had the daintiest of dinners, Arthur consulting his sister's pleasure in a way that went far to explain her affection for him and the friendship of the dowagers. Afterwards they drove to South Kensington.

'I wish it could have been a theatre, Doll,' he said; 'but it wouldn't be fair without warning the dad, and besides we sat too late over our coffee.'

He was glad himself it was not a theatre, for he had been chafing all the afternoon and wanted to be alone with Nebuchadnezzar, the cat, who took the world philo-

sophically himself, and never bored mere foolish humanity by sympathy with its various moods.

‘No, Doll, we won’t come in,’ he said, at the door of Albury House. ‘At least I won’t,’ he added hastily, noticing the sudden cloud on the two faces. ‘I dare-say Fairfax can afford to make an evening of it, as he’s a rising junior with the wool-sack in view, but no briefs. I can’t afford to sacrifice any more of the time that belongs to my clients at Dolly’s shrine. Oh, don’t mind me, Fairfax’—for the ingenuous youth was looking as if he felt he ought to go but very much wanted to stay.

‘Very well, then,’ said the lover, much relieved; ‘I should like to come in and renew my acquaintance with Mr. Strangways, if you think he won’t mind.’

Arthur walked off quickly, glad to find himself alone. He walked all the way to the Temple, and when he had arrived flung himself moodily on his sofa. It comforted him to dispossess Nebuchadnezzar and fling a sofa-pillow after his ruffled dignity.

‘I’ve had a facer, my friend,’ he said, addressing his cat, whose back was turned majestically towards him. ‘I wonder if such things happen in your world? I first make a sickening ass of myself, and then, when I try to undo it by the most abject attitude conceivable, a young lady just slaps me on the face. I feel jolly small, Nebuchadnezzar, jolly small, I can tell you.’

He hurled his slipper towards the cat as if the vindictiveness of the act comforted him. He did not often take his own moods seriously, but as he lay on his couch while the shadows gathered in the low room, and smoked and brooded, he began to feel very nasty indeed towards Miss Challoner. He recalled his preparations for the afternoon, and grinned in savage derision of himself. He thought of the girl’s proud face, and hated the contempt of himself which he conjectured there. He was no longer the gay, impudent, charming boy of Mrs. Mellor and the dowagers. The primitive man’s rage at an insult, perhaps something else, was up in him, and

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

as the hours passed his black mood grew in intensity of colour.

It was about eleven o'clock when he heard some one coming upstairs, whistling vigorously 'My Love's like a Red, Red Rose !'

'Sounds like Fairfax,' he muttered, 'and if he's coming here to maunder about Doll, I'm not his man for once.'

But the lusty kicking at his door which had begun, only ceased to be renewed with fresh vigour. It was plainly no use lying low ; Andrew Fairfax was determined to get in. Arthur got up at last grumbling, and flung open the door.

'There, if you must come in, don't bark your shins over anything till I get a light,' he said, savagely. 'I wonder you wouldn't have the decency to conclude I was in bed or something, and take yourself off from where plainly you weren't wanted.'

The other replied with a great roar of laughter. 'I'm hanged if I'm going to quarrel with you, you old misanthrope, this night of all nights.'

Arthur had by this time lit his lamp.

‘Look at me, man!’ said Fairfax. ‘Do you see any difference in me since this afternoon?’

‘None,’ replied the other, crossly, ‘except that you look a little more fatuous than usual. I suppose you mean that Doll has taken you, though how you managed it between Mrs. Brown’s doorstep and Mrs. Brown’s drawing-room is beyond me.’

‘We didn’t, you old duffer. It was in the blessed drawing-room itself. Your pater was out with that stunning girl—who isn’t a patch on Doll, however. They came in afterwards. There wasn’t a soul in the drawing-room, only a very old lady stone deaf, and after a while even she got up and went out.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said the other, sardonically.

‘Aren’t you? Well, maybe you’ll be surprised to hear that there hadn’t been a word said till she did go. I didn’t feel my courage anywhere near the sticking-point, and I don’t know how I brought it out. But after the very first I didn’t feel afraid of Doll, God bless her!’

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

‘No, I daresay you didn’t. But spare me further details. I’m glad’—half unwillingly—‘to know it’s all right.’

‘Thank you, old fellow. I knew you’d be glad, though you’re not exactly in a sympathetic mood to-night. I know I’m not fit to look at her, but I’ll take great care of her. You don’t think me quite unworthy, old fellow?’

‘He thinks himself unworthy, but wants other people to be assured of his worth!’ said Arthur, in comic despair. ‘Go on, my good fellow. Has the dad any idea of the state of affairs?’

‘I think so. He was quite cordial when I asked if I might see him to-morrow, and as for that beautiful creature who came in with him, I think she saw how it stood, for she looked so kindly at both of us.’

‘I daresay it didn’t require acute perception to see how things stood. Well, are you going to leave me to my interrupted slumbers?’

The other looked at him wistfully.

‘I thought you would have been so glad, old fellow.’

‘So I am, so I am, but all the world is not made up of lovers.’

‘No, worse luck ! If you were in love you would be more sympathetic. Why don’t you fall in love with Miss Challoner?’

‘Oh, hang it all, go to bed, man !’ said Arthur in uncontrollable irritation. ‘Go and sleep it off ! You’ll feel better in the morning.’ He pushed him out, and Fairfax looked ruefully back at the closed door.

‘Now what’s the matter with the fellow?’ A sudden happy inspiration came to him. ‘I see. He and Doll are so fond of each other that he can’t help feeling it a pang to give her even to me. Well, I ought to be able to understand it.’

The next evening brought Arthur a rapturous letter from Dolly herself. Everything was settled ; the dad had been adorably kind about it all, and she was in the seventh heaven. They were all going down to Gardenhurst early in the next week. Andrew could get off, and Beatrice also was to come.

‘*Beatrice !*’ quoted this very sullen young man. ‘So it has come to Christian

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

names with them. Well, if *Beatrice* is there so shall I be. I won't have dad flaunting his infidelity under Mrs. Mellor's nose. They'll see that one person can keep his head, and can be faithful to old ties and old friendships. I wonder how soon she'll be "Beatrice" to Frances and Sophia too!'

CHAPTER V

ALL the week following Mr. Strangways entertained the devil, and proved himself so excellent a host that his visitor was in no hurry to depart. It was some days before he could fulfil his threat of dropping in on the new Garden of Eden, as he sardonically called it, and meanwhile he had worked himself up to a finer indignation. There was a portrait of his mother in that study at Gardenhurst, which Duke so seldom used. She looked shadowily young and pathetic, with her fair hair drawn in long silken strands about her dreamy eyes and the pure oval of her cheeks. She had been dead so long that to her second youngest son she was as a being enskied, ensainted in some remote past, scarcely more real to him than the St. Cecílias and St. Agneses of a picture gallery. Yet there were

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

moments when he believed that his wrath sprang from a noble jealousy for the memory of that gentle mother.

‘You have so many visitors,’ he wrote to his sister Frances, about the middle of the week, ‘that I may perhaps be in the way, but I have a slack interval, and should like to run down on Saturday in time for dinner.’

The fine sarcasm was wasted on the lady. She took it to be Arthur’s jesting way, and did not trouble to reply. When the London train came in on the sleepy country platform on the Saturday evening there was no one in sight but Fred, who, with his hands in his pockets, stood smoking a very rakish-looking pipe.

‘Hullo,’ he called out, on seeing his brother alight, ‘thought I’d come and carry your bag for you.’

‘That’s decent of you, boy.’

‘More decent than you know, for we’ve been picnicking in the wood, and I’ve torn myself away from the skirts of the loveliest woman in England.’

‘Indeed!’ drily. ‘Who may that be in your sight just now?’

‘A ripping girl, and you’ll jolly well drop your superior air when you see her. She’s a Miss Challoner, whom the dad’s picked up in London.’

They were by this time out on the country road, sweetly overhung by the fringes of the wood. Arthur stopped to light his pipe, and having kindled it stretched out his hand for the bag.

‘Turn about, old fellow.’

‘Not so jolly likely,’ replied the other. ‘I’m in no end of training just now, and must keep it up.’

‘And so you’ve knocked under to this Miss Challoner?’

‘Knocked under! You may say it. Every soul in the house has knocked under to her, including the dogs. Why, there’s Maida. She’s got a litter of pups, jolly little beggars, and she suspects every one who goes near her of a design of stealing them. Well, what does she do yesterday evening, but comes slinking out on the lawn with them looking as pleased as Punch, and edges herself and them on to Miss Challoner’s skirt, for all the

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

world as if she'd known her all her life. You should see Frances's face, for she's always in a taking over puppies—thinks they rain fleas, poor little beggars. But Miss Challoner, I never saw such a jolly girl. She lets the little brutes walk all over her. She's not like a girl at all. *She* doesn't mind the fleas, not she.'

'She's seems to have pleased you as much as Maida?'

The boy grinned all over his chubby face.

'The pleasing is not all on one side. I'll let you into a bit of a secret. *She's* hugely pleased with me.'

'Get out, you conceited young beggar!'

'Oh, all right! Just keep your eyes open. That is all. I could say more, only it's beastly to brag about a lady's favour.'

'Mrs. Mellor not in it?'

'I haven't seen Mrs. Mellor, let me see, not since a week back.'

'You're a fickle young cub then.'

By this time they had reached Garden-hurst, and the dressing-bell was just ringing

through the house, so Arthur saw no one till he came into the drawing-room. Miss Challoner was already there, and was standing against the west window with her beautiful profile outlined against the gold of the sky. She made the slightest possible inclination of her head as he went in. It seemed to him to convey a contemptuous dislike. He could not see how the pained colour had rushed to her cheek and ebbed again, leaving her very pale. She had been having happy times at Gardenhurst, and now it seemed to her that, with the advent of this insolent young man, it was all over, and the sooner she went back to the unhomelike boarding-house the better. For the first time since her father died and her lover deserted her for a rich woman, the ice about Beatrice Challoner's heart had thawed at Gardenhurst. They were so simple, so unworldly, she thought.

She was as little practical as a child, or she would have known how to make her life sweeter despite her small income. She had been chilled and lonely and faithless since that old trouble, and she had,

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

perhaps, misjudged a world which does not always move according to interested laws of conduct. She had shrunk from civilities kindly meant, and had had no eyes for mutely proffered friendships. She drifted into boarding-houses because it was the easiest thing to do. In Colonel Challoner's lifetime they had stayed at Mrs. Brown's, and it seemed easier for her to go on staying at Mrs. Brown's than to go out in the world in a search for more homelike surroundings. Her room was under the roof of Albury House. In summer the breath of it was as a fiery furnace ; in winter the cold went to her heart. Elsewhere she could have had luxuries for what she paid Mrs. Brown, but she did not know it. Her father had always stood between her and the world, and when he was gone she was too unhappy to fling herself out into the big lonely place alone.

Duke had really been her first friend for years. Mrs. Brown was proud of the patronage of the Squire of Gardenhurst, and had been eloquent in her admiration

of him when he spent an exquisite May evening in playing bezique with deaf old Mrs. Ransom and the two Misses Fothergill, the latter melancholy specimens of boarding-house spinsters, with their meanness, their skittishness, their pretended love and real hatred for each other, and their malice as regarded the better-looking, better-endowed, and younger portion of the world at large. Beatrice Challoner had thought them, especially Miss Rosa, most piteous specimens of womankind, and the first attraction she felt towards Duke Strangways was in the observation of his remarkable charity towards them. Indeed charity it was not, it was an unconsciousness of their need of charity.

The girl had remarked the dead set the two spinsters made at the distinguished-looking elderly man, who seemed to find them charming instead of the wilted and seared women they really were. Duke Strangways idealised all women if they had but known ; and he could scarcely have defended himself more adroitly if he had guessed their schemes about him than by

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

doing what he did, and that was by showing a uniformly gay and sweet-tempered devotion to every woman in the house. If he gladdened Miss Rosa's heart by an offering of flowers one day, it was Miss Matilda's turn the next, and neither could feel especially singled out when another day brought a dainty basket of fruit for Mrs. Ransom or an opera ticket for Fraulein Schneider, who was starved for music, but could so rarely afford to hear good music.

The sight of his kindness and simplicity did Beatrice Challoner good. When, with a certain humility eminently becoming, he had made little advances towards her, the girl who at Mrs. Brown's had the reputation of being very haughty, had met him with a frank smile of kindness, at which the old fellow's heart took fire. From that time he devoted himself to Miss Challoner, with a difference. His accepted devotion to her was his recompense for the service, often somewhat exacted, which he never refused to the other women. His kindness, which seemed to demand no return, the girl found very restful. His slightly old-fashioned com-

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

pliments she thought charming. She liked the evident affection he had for her. She had known a young man's ardour, a young man's fire that had cooled before the prospect of a little privation, and she discounted such things.

She had scarcely noticed how Duke's devotion to herself had made her enemies of the two Misses Fothergill. Her acquaintance with those ladies was of the slightest, and she had never desired to improve it. If she had been happier she would have been amused perhaps at their affectations, their little cheese-parings, and the frequent sisterly passages-at-arms which enlivened Mrs. Brown's dinner-table. But as things had been she had only felt a new disgust for humanity in contemplating the pair. Now, as she watched Marmaduke Strangways' kindness towards them, she felt vaguely troubled within herself at her previous thoughts of them, or perhaps it would be truer to say at her contemptuous dismissal of them from her thoughts. Who was she, she had asked herself, to judge of them, being ignorant of the poverty, the

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

barrenness of life, which must have brought them to this? She wondered drearily what she herself might come to be after a quarter of a century of loneliness and the demoralisation of incessant small economies. But she never dreamt that the spinsters were regarding her in the light of a possible rival in Duke Strangways' affections.

She was vaguely amused when Mrs. Ransom came and sat by her one day, and took her firm young hand between two withered ones, which felt like very soft old kid.

'Don't you mind 'em, my dear,' said the deaf lady, nodding vigorously. 'He's a good man and a gentleman, if he is a little old, and handsome enough to make any woman proud of him. You've no place in a boarding-house, my dear, no place at all. I said it when I saw you first. "Where are her friends, Mrs. Brown?" I said; "where are the sweethearts?" Boarding-houses are for birds of passage, my dear, or for poor old wrecks high and dry on the shores of life, like myself, and those two old women and the Fraulein. You won't

let 'em hinder you, my dear?' she said, anxiously.

Beatrice did not quite understand what she was to be hindered from, or who would try to hinder her, but she was accustomed to Mrs. Ransom's confusion of ideas, so she nodded reassuringly.

'That's right, my dear,' said the dear lady, much relieved.

But the fact that Mrs. Ransom had had a very definite idea in her head, and the nature of that idea, had only sprung on the girl like a lightning-flash the evening she met Arthur Strangways at the Criterion. The revelation came upon her as an intolerable humiliation ; but when the first shame and sting of it had passed, the spirit in her, which the waters of calamity had failed to quench, reasserted itself. She would not give up the kind old friend who had brought new pleasure into her life for anything vulgar minds might think. And Dolly, too ; it was hard not to be fond of Dolly, so fresh, so sweet, so genuine. Father and daughter had brought such real pleasure into the lonely girl's life that

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

she was not minded to go back to the life without them.

Then followed the days when Dolly had taken her into her confidence about Andrew Fairfax. Beatrice Challoner was a girl of natural reticence, and circumstances had made her additionally so. To her, speech about her inmost thoughts was almost impossible. But this confidence that came as naturally, as easily as a bird sings his love-song for all the listening world, seemed to her inexpressibly sweet. She gave sympathy with both hands. She had seen Andrew Fairfax, and liked him ; and in her heart she longed that she too might have so sweet things to say, and the happy confidence to say them.

It was Dolly who had won her over to go to Gardenhurst. Dolly had sent reassuring accounts of her ahead, and both Frances and Sophia had been curious to see her for themselves. They were really simple and trustful folk, and ready to back their feminine intuitions against a world of evidence. The first sight of her in her youth and beauty had disarmed their fears.

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

This was no man-trap, no manœuvring spinster on the hunt for a rich husband. Dearly as they loved their father, there was perhaps the faintest touch of the disillusionment which is upon us all where our nearest are concerned. They could not believe that he could really in himself attract a young woman ; and it was easy to revert to their somewhat old-fashioned idea that the young were for the young, the old for the old.

Beatrice Challoner was quick to recognise that they trusted her. Once her heart was set at rest on this point she turned to be happy at home-like Gardenhurst with the eagerness of one long starved of the joy of her youth. It was the one life she had had no glimpse of; for all her days, since she could remember, she had been wandering about the Continent with her father in the search for health. It was always hotel life and boarding-house life, and the unhomely streets of foreign cities, and much dust and glare, and the faces of strangers rapidly succeeding each other.

But the ordered quiet at Gardenhurst,

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

how exquisite it was ! Gardenhurst in a golden June, with roses under the eaves and over many arbours, and the song of the nightingale when the blackbird had whistled the world asleep. Gardenhurst as fresh within as without, with every window open, and the rooms full of cool shade, so white and pure with the chintz window-curtains flapping lazily in the June air. After a night there she felt as if her skin must have grown as soft and bedewed as a child's, and her eyes cool and moistened, as though she had bathed them in refreshment.

The sisters had seen nothing in her during that week to make them reconsider their first impulsive faith. With them she was gentle and considerate as she was to their father. But her prime friendship was with the school-boy Fred.

He, of them all, had discovered the youth in her, which had lain unsuspected, unexhausted, through a lonely childhood and a disillusioned girlhood. The sisters marvelled at this preference, while they were simply pleased with it.

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

The boy was not *blasé* of country life, and he was delighted to find a companion now that Doll was 'always mooning round with Fairfax.' He took Miss Challoner fishing, and taught her to row. He presented her with his own favourite out of Maida's puppies, and even offered to induct her into the science of ratting, an offer she gratefully declined. She thoroughly enjoyed his egotistic school-boy talk, and was always ready with her ear and her sympathy. Duke looked on at this friendship with a gratification which was the last item, if any were needed, to complete the sisters' trustfulness. Perhaps after all he had mistaken his feelings towards the girl, and had never really felt anything for her except the tender kindness which it is in the heart of a man to feel for any young and lonely woman.

Now, said the girl bitterly to herself, this idyllic life would be spoilt. Perhaps Duke was partly to blame for her very indifferent opinion of his younger son. The one drop of gall in the elder man's gentleness of nature was the irritation Arthur's manner towards him had caused, a cumula-

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

tive irritation, which had reached its highest point after that afternoon when he had been so disrespectfully tickled over his father's love affairs.

She was saying to herself that now everything was spoilt, when Andrew Fairfax came into the room, looking, for all the world to see, a happy lover.

'So you've got down, old fellow,' he cried, heartily. 'A jolly change, hey, from that blazing, burning old bumble-bee, London? Oh, by the way, you don't know Miss Challoner, do you?'

'Thank you,' said his friend, coldly ; 'Miss Challoner and I have met before.'

Andrew Fairfax looked from that inscrutable face to the averted profile against the window-pane, with an uneasy sense in his good-natured mind of something being wrong.

CHAPTER VI

FRANCES was in her still-room the next morning when her brother came sauntering in. The Misses Strangways kept up the old admirable custom of brewing ale, and making wines of elderberry, cowslip, and blackberry. They were skilled in herbs, and their orange-flower water, from the recipe of a Madam Strangways under the Second Charles, was unexcelled. Arthur looked round at the well-stocked shelves with a memory of the days of his youth, and the treasure-house the still-room had then seemed to him. The memory ought to have been a pleasant one, but the young man did not look pleasant. His lips were set so firmly that the laughing lines about them had quite disappeared; his eyes looked sullen.

Frances looked up at him from where

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

she sat busily engaged labelling a number of bottles. The air of the place was aromatic and delicious. She smiled at him her kind, elder-sisterly smile.

‘Have you come to help me, Arthur, or to beg for a glass of blackberry wine, or a pot of red currant jam, as you used in old days?’

‘Neither,’ said the young man, seating himself in the window-seat, where the light flickered through a network of green leaves and an interlacing sheet of wire destined to keep the flies from the honeyed things within.

Something in his tone made his sister turn round.

‘Are you not well, Arthur?’ she asked, affectionately. ‘We all thought you were so silent last night, and you certainly do look out of sorts.’

‘Don’t bother about me,’ said the young man, ungraciously. ‘I’m all right ; but I must confess it’s not the same thing to me to come to Gardenhurst and find that girl here.’

‘That girl! Do you mean Miss Challoner?’

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

‘ Yes, I mean Miss Challoner. You are a woman of common-sense, Frances. Why did you invite to our house a girl of whom no one knows anything except what she chooses to tell, and whose only recommendation in our sight is that our father is head over ears in love with her ? ’

Frances looked at him with startled eyes.

‘ I don’t know,’ she said, lamely. ‘ Dolly liked her so much. And we have thought since she came down that everything Dolly said was true. She doesn’t seem to encourage the dad in that way. She seems far more taken up with Fred.’

‘ My dear sister, don’t you see that having won the dad first of all, her next move was to win over the rest of you ? Perhaps she knows that the dad has a way of giving in to his children about his matrimonial schemes, perhaps not. In any case it was her interest to be friends with you, and, by Jove, she *has* proved herself jolly deep. I wouldn’t have believed she’d have bamboozled every soul of you in such a little time.’

‘ Dear Arthur ! But she seems so gentle,

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

so modest. And then she is so beautiful. At her age she surely need not despair of a marriage more suitable to her in every way than marriage with a man who might be her father ?’

‘*O Sancta Simplicitas !*’ responded the youth, sourly. ‘It was time for me to come here and stop these idyllics. If something’s not done, take my word for it, she’ll be Mrs. Strangways before three months have gone over our heads.’

‘But what am I to do?’ said his sister, who was beginning to take the alarm. ‘She’s here now, and we can’t tell her to go. She has seemed so happy too, poor girl.’

‘I daresay. She’s seen her schemes prospering beyond her wildest hopes.’

‘My dear, I hope you’re not wronging her.’

‘Look at me, Frances, and tell me which of us is most likely to be right, you, who live here and meet no one, only those whom you thoroughly know, or I, whose profession brings me in contact with all kinds of shady things in human nature.’

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

‘Oh, I daresay you know best, dear Arthur, though, if your profession is going to make you suspicious and distrustful, I shall be sorry for it.’

‘You haven’t hitherto found me so, and now my distrust is well founded.’

At this moment Sophia came in, and something of the conversation was repeated to her. Sophia was slower to move in one direction or another than her sister Frances, and was more difficult to convince of Miss Challoner’s turpitude.

‘She hasn’t flung herself at the dad since she came here,’ she argued. ‘She has seemed twice as happy grubbing about with Fred after his dogs and rabbits and birds.’

‘She has felt secure, my dear. She knows nothing of Mrs. Mellor, for example. I gathered from Fred that you had been neglecting that very charming woman for this new friendship of yours.’

‘*H’m!*’ said Sophia. ‘We can test that. I don’t know how it is that we haven’t seen Mrs. Mellor for a week. Let us have her over, and see whether it will make any difference.’

‘But the dad may neglect Mrs. Mellor for her,’ argued Frances.

‘He won’t,’ said Arthur, shortly. ‘I’ll see to that.’

Now this test might have come to naught if Fred had not happened that morning to have gone away with a school-boy friend for a couple of days. Nothing probably would have drawn him from Miss Challoner’s side except the attraction his friend offered him—a two days’ cricket-match, with no less a person than ‘W. G.’ playing for the visitors.

With the school-boy’s departure the house had become lonelier for Beatrice. Duke was there as ever courteous and ready, but his elder daughters had their multifarious duties all the morning, and Dolly was usually wandering about with her lover. A day ago Beatrice would have had no difficulty in making herself happy, but to-day, with the unfriendly figure of Arthur looming in the background, she felt ill at ease. All at once she realised how little she had in common with Duke’s daughters. She knew nothing of the housewifely things

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

and the village interests that made up the engrossing part of their lives. She had not realised this before ; but as she sat with them on the lawn in the afternoon she confessed to an ignorance of all house-keeping matters which drew forth a mild reproof from Frances. Mild as it was, it would not have been uttered yesterday ; and the girl felt a new element in the atmosphere, something vaguely unfriendly and disapproving. It made her after a little while leave the two industrious ladies to their needlework, and stroll away by herself in the direction of the Home Paddocks. Duke was absent attending to his magisterial duties. Arthur had gone to carry his sister's message to Mrs. Mellor.

When she had left them Frances felt a little uneasy.

‘I’m afraid I’ve hurt her,’ she said, remorsefully. ‘After all it isn’t her fault if she knows nothing of housekeeping, and has not the vaguest idea of the responsibilities which we assumed so naturally.’

‘No,’ said Sophia, ‘it isn’t her fault, but it will be bad for Gardenhurst if Arthur’s

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

prophecy comes true. Everything about Gardenhurst is accustomed to personal interest and personal supervision.'

'Oh, I don't think we need face that possibility yet,' said Frances, nervously, and then added : 'It is strange how Arthur has upset my mind about the girl. Yesterday I felt quite easy, and to-day I can't help wishing her a thousand miles away.'

'Keep on wishing,' said Sophia, dryly, 'and she won't be able long to stay in your immediate neighbourhood. All the same I'm not altogether convinced by that boy's cocksureness. I'll wait till I see for myself ; but I mean to keep my eyes open for the next few days. One can't be too cautious when there is a question of a step-mother—a young one too, and about as fitted to take up our place at Gardenhurst as Maida would be.'

Frances shuddered. She was a thorough-going housewife, and was honestly proud of the exquisite manner in which her father's house, under her supervision, was kept. For a moment her mind ran over her treasures. There was the linen-room, with

its piles of damask and fresh linen. She knew every darn in those precious piles of napery ; she could put her hand in the dark on any article where it lay between strewings of lavender. She thought of the china closet with its famous dinner-service of Spode, and its Worcester tea-cups. She thought of her still-room and preserve cupboard, of her dairy and plate-chest. To let all these fall to incompetent hands would be, she felt, an extreme bitterness. She sighed heavily with a great longing that Miss Challoner was safely from under the roof of Gardenhurst, and for the first time the alternative thought of Mrs. Mellor as a wife for her father flashed across her mind and found a moment's entertainment there.

An hour before dinner Arthur came strolling across the lawn towards them.

‘ Yes, Mrs. Mellor will come. I offered to wait for her, but she said I’d distract her mind while she was dressing.’

He stood for a minute or two, while his lips curved in a rather disagreeable smile.

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

‘So Miss Challoner has deserted you, my dears. I came upon her and the dad strolling in the elm-walk. The dad had Gipsy’s bridle over his arm. They looked as if they’d been at it a long time.’

The sisters looked at him in dismay.

‘And I,’ said Frances, bitterly, ‘was thinking I’d hurt her feelings, and all the time, I suppose, she left us here because she’d promised to meet the dad on his way from Sutcliffe.’

‘It looks pretty bad,’ agreed Sophia, gloomily.

The dressing-bell had rung before Duke and the unconscious Beatrice came back to the house. When the girl had dressed hastily and come down to the drawing-room, she found every one waiting for her. Mrs. Mellor was there, and looking very well indeed in a gown of soft red crepe, which showed off her fair and dimpled shoulders prettily. Mrs. Mellor could always afford to dress young, for she had kept her girlish roundness and something of girlish slimness.

When Beatrice came in, feeling shy

and depressed, the move was made for dinner. She put her hand rather limply on Arthur Strangways' proffered arm. When they had taken their places she was glad to find Andrew Fairfax beside her. The lovers were the only people she could feel sure had not altered towards her since yesterday. She made very little response to her escort's civilities, and ate little. She had found the heat of the day trying. She noticed that Mrs. Mellor watched her with curiosity, and wondered why. She did not connect it with Duke's anxiety over her, as she sent away plate after plate, with the food scarcely tasted.

If she could have consulted her own feelings in the matter she would have left Gardenhurst at once. Why, she thought of that high-up room at Mrs. Brown's as a happy and peaceful refuge now. But she felt she must leave in the conventional manner, and not as if she had detected that faint, almost impalpable coldness.

She had no anger against any one but Arthur. Him she scarcely dared to look at, so intolerable did she find his cool glance

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

and mocking smile. When he jested with Mrs. Mellor across the table she felt that his voice disturbed her. But her want of appetite was the only sign she gave of inward discomfort.

Her anger against her neighbour acted in a manner as a spur. As the meal went on her head grew more erect, her eyes brighter. She was furious with herself for having been persuaded to come to Gardenhurst, but at least she would die game, would leave the place not as one who had not been a most honoured and welcome guest.

So after dinner she allowed herself to be led to the piano by that hateful man, as she termed Duke's second son. Arthur stood by her turning over the leaves of her music while she sang song after song, or wandered off into dreamy music that consoled well with the quiet June gloaming. She had braced herself up to show no sign of the torture she endured from her enemy and his unkindly attentions. If you could have looked into the room you would have said the scene was ideally pleasant and homelike.

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

Duke and Mrs. Mellor were playing bezique by the light of a rose-shaded silver lamp in a quiet corner of the room. Duke's daughters had drawn their chairs to the French window, where Frances had gone comfortably asleep, and Sophia sat rigidly knitting, and gazing out on the green twilight in the garden. The lovers had strolled away down the garden path, as they had done every evening after dinner since their arrival.

But all at once Beatrice's fortitude gave out. She was not a conventional woman, and was no adept at playing a part, and she could endure no longer what she felt to be Arthur Strangways' insolent attentions. She stood up quickly and looked about the room. She did not feel well, and had a horror of making a scene. She looked towards Sophia, but Sophia did not look inviting. Dolly was nowhere to be seen. She noticed that Duke had turned towards her anxiously, and she went up to him in sudden appeal.

'I am tired,' she said. 'I think the heat has tried me a little.'

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

Duke stood up at once, and drew her hand through his arm protectingly.

‘You will be the better for a little air,’ he said. ‘Mrs. Mellor, I’ll put this boy in my place for a little while. Come, Arthur!’

It was all very quiet, and had scarcely attracted the attention of Sophia at her distant window. The changing of places was done quickly, and Duke led the girl into the verandah. He put her in a comfortable chair, and wrapped her shawl about her with the tender deference and deftness which showed he was used to taking care of women. Then he fetched a cushion and a footstool for her from the drawing-room, and she rested in the cool, quiet, and dark, with no sense of anything but the immediate relief it was to be there.

Sophia had meanwhile come out from her dreaminess, and, becoming aware of the state of things, had touched Frances lightly on the knee. The elder sister was broad awake in a moment. Sophia pointed silently at the two heads in the lamplight where Arthur had soberly taken his father’s place.

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

‘Where is the dad?’ asked Frances, sitting bolt upright, and looking as scared as if Duke had eloped.

‘Hush! at the other end of the verandah with *that* girl.’

Poor Beatrice! She had given confirmation, strong as Holy Writ, to the words of her enemy.

CHAPTER VII

THE next day was the day of the picnic ; not the simple family picnics which the Strangways indulged in all the summer through, and the pleasure of which consisted in having their lunch out of doors, and their tea under difficulties, but a slightly more elaborate excursion. Deep in Allo Wood, half a dozen miles from Gardenhurst, was Allo Water, and by the banks of the little river that fed it there were the ruins of a Benedictine priory. Happy people the monks must have been, buried in this green solitude, with a few fields of their own clearing round about for the convent kine and the convent hay and corn ; with the gentle trout stream flowing below their walls, and the woods full of game.

Allo Water was a favourite picnick-

ing place of the neighbourhood, but as the neighbourhood only numbered a few families of gentlefolk, you might nine times out of ten have the waterside to yourself, and the tenth time the intruders would be of the most apologetic and retiring order.

Beatrice woke up the morning of the picnic with a dread of what the day might bring forth. When it had been planned a few days ago, she had promised Fred that she would drive with him in the governess-cart, and be his companion in the walk through the woods to the Abbey. Then all had been so different, and she had looked forward with the eagerness of one who had been starved of pleasures to the long day in the open air, and the thousand and one little pleasures she should share with the boy, who was so fresh and expert a guide to the secrets of English woods. Well, at all events, Fred would come back to-morrow, and she should be no longer friendless. She could not well leave before Saturday, but with Fred in the house things would be different. She and Fred could keep much out of doors and away from

the detestable brother. His would be a harmless and helpful advocacy ; she felt instinctively that Duke's friendship only made her position more awkward.

As a matter of fact he did her no good that morning. The waggonette and a dog-cart were in requisition, and when these had drawn up before the hall door, Duke made a somewhat conspicuous attempt to secure Beatrice for his companion in the dog-cart. Every one noticed it, and Mrs. Mellor, looking charming in her gray cloak, trimmed with silver, tapped an impatient foot on the doorstep.

‘Are you bent on the dog-cart, dad?’ asked Arthur, suavely.

‘Yes, I know how to handle Sheila better than you, my lad.’

‘Oh, very well, though I had looked forward to giving Miss Challoner a fast spin. Come, Mrs. Mellor.’

The lady flashed a quick glance, which might have meant understanding and perhaps gratitude, and mounted quickly to the seat in the dog-cart. Duke said something under his breath that no one heard

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

but himself, and probably registered another black mark in his mind against his son, but he mounted to Mrs. Mellor's side as briskly and beamingly as if her company of all others was the thing he had been longing for.

Arthur drove the waggonette, and the final arrangement of seats left Frances beside him, and Sophia and Beatrice Challoner behind. The lovers had jogged off earlier in the governess-cart with the provisions, very happy in any plan that secured to them their sweet solitude *à deux*. They had Shag, the old Shetland pony, who required an early start if he was to arrive in time for lunch, and a small army of dogs gambolled behind the cart, or rode when soft-hearted Dolly thought they were in need of a rest.

As Arthur assisted Beatrice to her place he noticed with a momentary misgiving that her eyes were full of tears. For a quarter of an hour afterwards he drove in silence, feeling himself "no end of a sweep." Then his familiar spirit came back to him and whispered that these tears were because her plans were going wrong and she felt Garden-

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

hurst slipping from her grasp. A girl, he said to himself, who could contemplate a mercenary marriage with an old man did not deserve to be fought with gloves. Nay, perhaps those tears were meant to win him over. He had heard of women of her type who could weep at will.

The girl kept silence through the drive. Now and again her attention was called to some object of interest on the way, and she looked at it as bidden, but offered no comment. If she had only known, Frances and her sister were ascribing this silence to vexation at being supplanted by Mrs. Mellor, and were mentally thanking their brother for his warning words of wisdom, which had resulted in opening their eyes fully to her real character.

When they arrived at the picnicking ground, where they found the lovers tardily engaged in setting out the luncheon, Arthur constituted himself Beatrice's attendant. It had the effect of putting Duke entirely out of court, and forcing him to confine his attentions to Mrs. Mellor. In spite of her will and courage

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

the girl began to look rather miserable. Sophia afterwards commented on this to Frances.

‘She looked just like a girl who had lost her lover, or whose lover had deserted her before her eyes for another girl ; and all the while there was Arthur doing everything possible for her. Now is it conceivable that any ordinary, good, natural girl wouldn’t prefer a young fellow like him to the dad, however pleasant the dear dad may be ? ’

Frances assented that it was not conceivable.

After the lunch it was proposed that they should walk to the ruins. The elder sisters cried off. They had seen the ruins so often and the day was hot for walking. They would sit by Allo Water and rest, and have the tea ready by the time the others returned.

‘Am I to have charge of you, my dear Miss Challoner ? ’ asked Duke, with a hope that this time Arthur would not interfere. He had enjoyed his drive with Mrs. Mellor, but after all he could have

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

Mrs. Mellor any day, and she had not the fascination of the younger woman.

Beatrice was about to assent eagerly. It was to escape to a friend she trusted from an atmosphere charged with enmity. But this time it was his daughter Sophia who intervened. Her voice had a sharp ring.

‘Dearest papa,’ she said—it was only when Duke’s children were very angry with him that they called him ‘papa’—‘you will take Mrs. Mellor *of course*. Let the young people go together. You could not expect to be as good a guide for Miss Challoner as your son.’

Duke’s eyes flashed, and for a moment rebellion seemed imminent. Mrs. Mellor winced a little at the *gaucheté* of Sophia’s speech as regarded herself, but concluded to forgive the dear girl under the circumstances. Beatrice Challoner turned away, and then said in a very low voice—

‘May I stay with you, Miss Strangeways? I do not feel at all inclined for a walk.’

‘Oh, but you must see the Abbey,’ cried both sisters simultaneously. ‘And Arthur

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

is such a delightful guide. He knows the history of everything.'

She looked around a little forlornly. She had a momentary wild idea of flinging herself on the mercy of Dolly and Andrew Fairfax, but a consideration of what the others would think deterred her. She turned dumbly, and without looking at Arthur Strangways went slowly beside him up the winding path from the water-side.

Once or twice she turned to look back. Duke and Mrs. Mellor were coming behind her at a little distance. Her longing to escape from Arthur Strangways' company was so great that she made an appeal to him.

'Let us wait for the others,' she said.
'Please, I should like to wait for them.'

Arthur Strangways set his teeth.

'They do not want us,' he said, coldly.
'I'm afraid you must be contented with my companionship.'

He knew the wood thoroughly. They were by this time out of sight of Duke and Mrs. Mellor. From the path a winding grass-grown way diverged here and there. These were the woodcutters' paths, little

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

used by other pedestrians, and full of rough places and old stumps of trees. But Arthur Strangways was in a merciless mood. He knew the paths that would lead them by a long *détour* to the ruin. That would effectually prevent their joining or being joined by Duke and his companion. He led the way down one of those winding paths, exquisitely dappled with light and shade. The girl followed unquestioningly.

It was certainly a long *détour*, and little was said between the pair. It seemed to Beatrice Challoner that they walked for hours. She had never been accustomed to much walking, and not at all to such rough walking as this. One thing she was grateful for. Her companion tramped along in a moody silence, and did not offer her any of those half-mocking attentions which she had found it so hard to accept.

Sometimes they emerged into clearings upon which the June sun shone blindingly. The day had become sultry with the heat of three o'clock, the hottest hour of a day of heat. They plunged again from those

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

golden intervals into paths which, for a moment, after coming from the bright sunshine, seemed black as night.

They had entered one such leafy tunnel, down which Arthur was tramping steadily—a little ahead of his weary companion. If he had seen how tired she looked he might have been moved to take compassion on her, but for a long time he had not glanced at her face.

Presently he was startled by a sharp cry, and turned round just in time to see Miss Challoner sink down a limp heap of black drapery. He sprang to her side in quick alarm. She had turned deadly pale and her lips were white.

‘What is it?’ he said.

‘I don’t know. I slipped on that old stump, and have wrenched my ankle, I’m afraid.’

‘Keep very still and I will see. I am used to sprained ankles.’

He knelt down and lifted her with the utmost tenderness to a sitting position against the trunk of a tree.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘be brave. I may

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

hurt you a little in seeing what is the matter, but I will hurt you as little as possible.'

He propped her foot under his coat, and felt the ankle quickly.

'It is wrenched, not broken,' he said. 'I will try to give you a little ease.'

While he talked he was removing her shoe and cutting away the stocking about her ankle. In the few minutes it had become very swollen. A little stream ran by the path, and even while she was wondering at his quickness and cleverness, he had dipped his handkerchief into it and made it into a cold-water compress. He then bound it about with the tie he had taken from his neck.

'Better now?' he asked, when he had finished these proceedings.

'Yes,' she answered, smiling faintly.

He looked up at her for the first time.

'By Jove, you are a good-plucked 'un, as Fred would say. Not many women would have borne it as well.'

But the sprained ankle was only the culmination of Beatrice's miseries, and she

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

suddenly began to cry, big heavy tears that came silently with a slow heaving of her breast.

‘Why, you poor child!’ cried Arthur, forgetting everything but that she was young and in pain, and, as he suddenly realised, very sweet and beautiful. Also that he was a brute, and that he wished he had the kicking of himself, and a few other things of the same sort. He began to have a glimmering sense of what passion ‘cruel as the grave’ had been working in him since the first evening he had seen Beatrice Challoner’s pale face. ‘Why, you poor child!’ he said, taking the nervously twitching hands between his own. They were not withdrawn, and the girl wept on quietly, while he looked miserably down upon her.

He only yielded up her hands to her when she drew them away to dry her tears. Those tears, which had dimmed her beauty, as tears always do, despite the novelists, had brought out unexpected lines and shadows of melancholy about her sweet mouth and in the depths of her eyes.

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

What had come to Arthur Strangways? He looked up at her from where he still knelt beside her, and felt bitterly humbled and ashamed, as well as full of an overpowering pity which feared all things for her, and longed to save her from all unhappiness, whatever the cost. Her beauty could never have worked so magically on him as her helplessness and her tears.

He let her cry herself out. Then, when she was once more tranquil, he spoke.

‘We are quite near the road. If we can reach it and wait, some one is sure to pass by whom we can send for help. I must get some kind of conveyance to carry you to Gardenhurst, but we must reach the road first. I shall have to carry you there ; there is no other way.’

The girl turned rosy red, but made no protest. He took her up very carefully and tenderly, and, picking his way among the snags of forest trees, made for the road. It was quite near, as he had said, but a difficult little journey considering that he was carrying a grown woman ; yet, if he could have had his will, the journey had been many

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

times as long. She kept her eyes closed as she lay against his shoulder, except when she opened them to assure him she felt no pain, an assurance which her deadly paleness contradicted. Again and again he had to fight against an inclination to kiss her, to press her more closely to him, as she lay there so helplessly. However, he kept his head, and was able to set her down easily in a matter-of-fact way, and to make her as comfortable as he could when they reached at length the broad, grassy forest road.

In a little while there came by a rustic bearing faggots. From him Arthur learned that there was a donkey cart to be had for hire, and near at hand. Stimulated by a reward the man fetched the little low cart and its steed. The cart looked inviting, for it was filled with sweet-smelling new grass.

‘Now, my man,’ said Arthur, ‘I want you to find a picnic party at Allo Water and give them this message.’ He had scribbled a few lines on a leaf torn from his pocket-book. ‘Think you can find

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

them, eh ?' The man grinned and nodded an assent, and was gone.

'Now, I am going to lead this little beast so as to jolt you as little as possible. We shall probably be some time getting home, but it is the only way.'

'But your sisters, what will they think ?'

His face darkened with a remembrance of his own mischief-making.

'They will be very sorry, and will hurry home to make you as comfortable as they can.'

He heaped the grass in the donkey-cart so as to support her shoulders, and lifted her in. For his sake she repressed the cry which rose to her lips at every movement, deft and tender as he was. He had arranged his coat for her foot to rest upon, despite her protests.

'We shall avoid publicity,' he said, 'for the wood gives on the edge of Gardenhurst. But in any case walking in my shirt sleeves is not more remarkable than my leading the little moke, and it is the pleasantest way of walking this hot day.'

By the time they reached Gardenhurst the girl was feverish with pain. Going so

slowly they took some hours to it, and Arthur did not dare quicken the pace. He said very little to her, though she was conscious of the compassionate gravity of his face, and the incessant watchfulness that spared her many jolts. There was a great deal in his heart to say, but not just at this moment ; he felt it was not the right time. However, just before they left the fringes of the wood he stopped a minute or two and let the donkey pick a mouthful of sweet grass. Then he said hurriedly :—

‘I know this is no time to bother you, but just let me say how bitterly sorry I am for having been such a brute to you. Let me implore you to give me another chance. I don’t ask you to forgive me yet, but to give me a chance of winning forgiveness.’

She smiled at him, though her eyes were bright with pain and her cheeks flushed. He muttered an exclamation of pity, and went on again with his head bent, his eyes watching the road carefully for stones or ruts. When they reached Garden-hurst the picnic party had returned. His sisters, he saw, were in as much consternation

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

as if Beatrice Challoner had been their dearest friend. He sighed with relief as they came running down the steps.

‘Good old girls!’ he said, under his breath, ‘I might have trusted them for decency.’

But when he went to lift Beatrice Challoner from the donkey-cart he found her in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VIII

THE remainder of the week Arthur Strangways took his punishment. The doctor called in to Miss Challoner found her in a high state of fever, which was not likely to be allayed for some days.

‘Keep her quiet,’ he said to Frances, who was a devoted nurse. ‘She seems so harassed by the thought that she must leave this on Saturday that the fever is greatly increased. There is no reason that she should leave on Saturday, is there?’

‘None at all,’ said Frances, with conviction.

‘Because she is not at all likely to be able to move on Saturday, or for a good many days to come. It is fortunate you are so hospitable a hostess, Miss Frances.’

‘Oh, indeed, it would be strange if we weren’t willing to keep the poor thing till

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

she is over the accident she met with in my brother's company, and for which he blames himself so bitterly.'

'Well, make her as happy as you can, anyhow, and a good many people would be happy enough with her privileges,' said Dr. Nutt, gallantly. Dr. Nutt was credited in the neighbourhood with a design of making Miss Frances Strangways Mrs. Nutt, and popular opinion was much divided as to the likelihood of his ultimate success.

Arthur waylaid him every day to hear news at first hand of the patient. He looked so conscience-stricken that the good doctor was quite impressed.

'Don't worry over it, my dear young sir,' he said kindly, laying a big capable hand on the young fellow's shoulder. 'The lady will be all right in a few days, and, so far as I can learn, the accident might have happened in any one's company.'

The young man turned away uncheered. Now the bitterest part of his punishment was his failure to undo the mischief he had done. He had taken the very first opportunity to assure his two sisters that he be-

lieved every suspicion he had imparted to them of Miss Challoner to be absolutely unfounded, and had proceeded, so far as he dared without betraying himself, to blacken himself while rehabilitating the lady. But he had reckoned without the conservatism, the gentle obstinacy of his sisters. They listened to all he had to say, but remained unconvinced.

‘Dear boy,’ said Frances, ‘we know your good, kind heart. And it is natural for you to feel so sorry for the poor girl that you forget the things you saw with your own eyes, and opened our eyes to. But you know we did see for ourselves at last.’

‘Any one could have seen with half an eye,’ said Sophia, grimly. ‘And it is no use taking the girl’s part now.’

He realised that it was no use, and turned away loathing himself more bitterly than ever. His misery was so apparent that it brought about Duke’s forgiveness of much he had disliked in his second son. His friendliness was an additional heaping of coals upon the culprit’s head. When his father sought him out for a stroll after

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

dinner or a game at billiards, the young fellow groaned internally.

‘Good old dad,’ he said. ‘If he only knew what a sweep I am, what a confounded low cur!’ But he felt confession was impossible.

He learned to appreciate his father in those days, when they strolled up and down the long terrace, or sat over their wine together. Duke talked freely, as if for the first time he had forgotten to be afraid of his son’s caustic wit. His talk was revelatory of his nature, simple, frank, full of chivalry and kindness. The young man often looked at him with a sickening sense of shame.

‘And I used to laugh at him,’ he thought. ‘Used to snigger at him like any low, common bounder. And what a brave, clean-minded old boy he is, worth a million of fellows like me!’

Frances had told him of Beatrice Challoner’s eagerness to leave Gardenhurst, an eagerness which somewhat puzzled the good lady, who was certain that the girl could not have discovered from her that

her presence was unwelcome. Indeed it had ceased to be unwelcome for the present, for Frances was one of those born nurses, to whom their patient, for the time being, is an object of the most affectionate solicitude. But the young man understood. There was an accusing voice within him that gave him no peace, and would not be answered.

‘Call yourself a gentleman,’ it said, shrilly; ‘it *was* a task for a gentleman and a man to come and blacken a lonely girl to the friends she had made, to turn her out of the house where she had found friendship and happiness into the lonely world again. Call yourself a gentleman indeed!’ repeated the voice, with the withering sarcasm of a *gamin* of the streets.

He was to return to London on the Saturday, and as the days passed, he found that there was no hope of speech with Miss Challoner. Some days must yet elapse, said Dr. Nutt, before they could get her downstairs and on to a sofa. The feverish condition of the girl, who had a very sensitive nervous organisation, was much more difficult than the sprained ankle. But they

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

would hope to get Miss Challoner back among them in a week or so.

Fred had returned to hear of the accident with dismay. His contempt for his brother was refreshing.

‘Well, you old duffer,’ he had said, ‘if I couldn’t take better care of a lady than to break her ankle when she went out walking with me, I’d turn monk. I’m hanged if I wouldn’t.’

But on the Saturday morning there was a more serious reckoning. Arthur was packing in his room when the door was flung open, and his young brother entered unceremoniously, with a set-back of his shoulders and a colour in his cheeks that showed he was very excited.

‘What’s the matter, youngster?’ asked Arthur, rather alarmed.

‘There’s a jolly good deal the matter,’ said the lad, facing him with flaming eyes. ‘What have you been sneaking into the minds of the girls about Beatrice Challoner? There’s that old silly of a Sophia just been saying that the sooner the girl’s out of the house the better. “Ask Arthur,” she says.

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

“And what am I to ask him?” said I; “and what can he say that will change my opinion of the lady?” I put a stopper on her; but I saw how it was. I felt the mischief in the air the minute I entered the house. Now, what have you to say for yourself?’

‘Precious little,’ said the other, with a grimace.

The boy glared at him silently for a minute. Then he said, with fierce deliberation—

‘Upon my word, you deserve a kicking, and I’ve a jolly good mind to kick you myself.’

‘Oh, get out, you young fighting-cock!’ with a lamentable laugh.

‘Upon my word, I’m ashamed to have such a brother as you.’

‘Here, stow it, Fred, and go be hanged! You’ve piled it on enough for the present!’

‘You’ll hear more about it all the same,’ said the youth, departing, his head very high in air.

‘Oh, Lord,’ said Arthur, ‘hadn’t I punishment enough without Fred adding his bit? What a plucky young beggar it

is! and Lord knows he's right! If it wasn't so ridiculous I'd have asked him to come on and have taken my kicking like a man.'

In the evening he departed for town sorrowfully. A day or two later Beatrice Challoner came downstairs, limping along with the aid of a crutch, and looking very pale and spiritless. A chintz-covered sofa was drawn up to the drawing-room window, quite close to the path outside, and within reach of the roses. On this she was comfortably installed; and it would be hard to say whether Fred or his father was most devoted in attention to her. Frances and Sophia were also very kind. As long as the girl was an invalid and at their mercy, their surveillance was relaxed. Even the lovers gave up some of their precious time—Andrew Fairfax's holiday was now drawing to a close—in order to entertain her. They went fruit-picking, ostensibly on her account, and brought her the ripest strawberries, heaped high on a cabbage leaf, and surmounted with a rosebud, or the most luscious white-heart

cherries. Duke was always ready to read or talk to her, while Fred lay on the floor and kicked his heels with an abnegation of his out-door pursuits that spoke volumes for his devotion.

Still the girl was silent and looked sad. Still her anxiety was to get away from Gardenhurst. It distressed Duke, who had no idea of all that had been happening under his nose, and it enraged the boy, who understood very well and carried about with him an implacable heart towards the author of the mischief.

Every one was kindness itself, as she acknowledged gratefully many times. Even Mrs. Mellor, who had called several times to inquire for the invalid, came over in her pretty victoria to take her for a drive as soon as the doctor thought it well to give her permission. The widow was a kind-hearted woman, and acted quite without design, yet, if she had known, this thoughtfulness of hers stirred warmer emotions towards her in Duke's heart than any number of little lures put out for himself could have done.

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

Fred, too, whose relations with his elder sisters were quite strained—he had called Sophia ‘a juggins’ to her face—was loud in his praises of Mrs. Mellor as no end of a jolly good sort.

But the days went, and soon Beatrice was able once more to put her foot under her. She had been waiting eagerly for this time so that she might get back to Albury House, but it was a month from the time of her accident before Dr. Nutt would hear of her stirring.

The time turned round to her last evening at Gardenhurst, and Duke, who had accepted the absence of hostilities on the part of his family as a tacit approval of his matrimonial schemes, had not found time or opportunity to speak. This last evening he made his opportunity. He had got Fred out of the way on an errand, and he had taken the girl for a walk in the overblown June garden. He had been silent for a while, but his silence suited his companion’s mind. When he spoke there was something in his voice that startled her.

‘My dear Miss Challoner,’ he said, ‘I want you to listen to me patiently, and to bear with me if I seem to you over-presumptuous.’

‘Yes?’ said the girl in a very low voice.

‘I am an old man, my dear, and you are a beautiful young woman, and if I saw a chance of advancing your happiness in any other way than this I would do it, honestly. You are young, my dear, and you seem very friendless for one of such youth and beauty. I wonder whether I might offer you a home and an old man’s heart, which would be very tender and faithful to you for the time that is left?’

‘Oh, don’t, please,’ said the girl, faintly. ‘Please don’t talk about such a thing. Indeed I couldn’t, I couldn’t think of it.’

Duke’s eager face looked piteously blank. Then he touched her skirt with a hand that trembled a little.

‘My dear, I beg your pardon,’ he said, very humbly.

Beatrice burst into tears.

‘Oh, please, don’t say it like that,’ she cried. ‘You have been so good, and un-

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

selfish, and kind. I have always liked you so much, and I am afraid it is my fault. I would do anything to show you how sorry I am.'

'Anything but marry me !' said Duke. 'Well, don't cry, my dear. There's no harm done. You see it dazzled an old fellow like me to be treated as kindly as you have treated me, and I forgot the great gulf of years that lies between us. Well, well ! we must forget I was such an old fool, and you must not punish me by withdrawing your friendship from me.'

But Beatrice sobbed uncomforted, for she felt weak and out of sorts still. Duke waited quietly till she had recovered her self-control.

'And now, my dear,' he said, with a rather sad smile, 'though you have refused me, you must let me be your friend, and look after you a little till you meet your natural protector. Gardenhurst will always be glad to see your sweet face, and in any little business worry you must always come to me. Ladies can't be expected to understand such things.'

‘ You are too good,’ she said.

‘ I’m not a good business man myself,’ said Duke, frankly. ‘ But my boy, Arthur, has a very wise head for so young a man. And a very good lad, my dear, a good, kind lad. Arthur and I didn’t get on so well once upon a time, but I didn’t understand the lad. It was only when I saw how grieved he was for being the cause of your accident that I began to appreciate his kind and generous heart.’

After that they talked about other and indifferent things, Duke doing his best to make the girl forget that she had just refused him. He looked with subdued cheerfulness round the beautiful old garden, and at the gray gables of the house, visible over a sweet-briar hedge in front of the sheltered arbour where they were sitting. Through the greenery he caught a glimpse of Dolly’s pink frock where she walked with her lover.

‘ Ah, well,’ he thought, ‘ love is for the young, and roses for the young. I mustn’t be a discontented old fellow. I’ve had more than my share of life’s sweets, and

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

I must be making way for the young people.'

'Here is Fred,' he said aloud. 'He's become a prompt messenger since he's known that you're awaiting his return. Don't turn the boy's head, my dear!'

Beatrice laughed in relief. She had felt greatly troubled at hurting the kind, chivalrous old friend for whom she had learnt to have a warm affection. When Fred came up, his father, with some little jesting remark, left them. The lad flung himself on the grass beside the girl's gown with a sigh of satisfaction.

'It's jolly here,' he said, 'and why the dad should take to running me off my legs the very last evening of your stay, I can't make out, unless that he's such a greedy old boy, and wanted to absorb you.'

'Never mind, old fellow,' said the girl, laughing. 'You're back now anyhow, and will appreciate my company all the more.'

'No, I'm hanged if I could do that!'

They were silent for a few minutes, during which the boy tilted his hat over his eyes, and the girl gazed about her at the

garden, feeling she was having her last glance at its beauties. She had made up her mind that, in spite of Duke's friendship, she must never come to Gardenhurst again.

'You'll be sorry to go, Beatrice?' said the boy, suddenly.

'Very, and especially to say good-bye to you. You've been a dear old fellow to me, Fred.'

The boy sat up and gazed at her very earnestly. 'I'm young, Beatrice,' he began with solemnity.

'You are, Fred, there's no use denying it.'

'Oh, hang it all, I'm not so young as all that! There are lots of fellows ever so much younger. Why, Dixon Junior knows a fellow who was married at my age.'

'But you're not thinking of getting married, Fred?'

'Not just yet, but later, I may. It depends on you, Beatrice'—taking his courage in both hands. 'You've no objection to the diplomatic service?'

'None in life, dear boy.'

'Because, you know, I'm intended for it, and a friend of the dad's has promised me

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

an opening as soon as ever I leave the 'Varsity. I'll have to drop the 'Varsity, I'm afraid. But suppose we were engaged, I might be in a position in a shorter time than any one could expect to offer you a home ?'

'But, you dear ridiculous boy, you mightn't be.'

'You wouldn't like to be engaged unless we saw some prospect of getting married ? How would it be if we told no one ? You might wear an engagement ring round your neck, over your heart, you know, like an awfully jolly girl in a story I read at school.'

'It wouldn't work, Fred, dear,' said the girl, keeping back the laughter she saw would hurt him. 'It would unsettle you too much. And I shouldn't like you to drop the University. You must go on and do well, and be a credit to us all. I mean to be proud of you as well as fond of you.'

'All right, Beatrice, perhaps you're right,' with a sigh. 'And after all, though I shouldn't mind losing the beastly cram, I should like to be one of the 'Varsity eleven. You'd feel jolly proud of me if

you saw me making my centuries and getting my blue maybe.'

'I should feel jolly proud, old fellow.'

'Well, look here, Beatrice, I may ask you again when I'm older, but anyhow you'll remember that I'm bound to be a brother to you,—a real decent sort of brother, you know, that takes your part, and brings you to shows and places, and knocks down any fellow that as much as looks at you.'

'Thank you, dear boy,' said the girl, 'I'll remember to apply to you.'

The boy took up her hand and kissed it with affectionate gallantry. He looked grave for quite two minutes, till the girl whispered to him—

'Don't forget the University eleven, Fred.'

'You'll come to see me at the Oval one day?' said the lad, anxiously. 'Against Surrey, you know. And if you don't understand the game—girls never do—don't mind asking me about any point. I'll explain with pleasure.'

CHAPTER IX

It was a gray, sad July evening. Beatrice Challoner's room was high above a roaring slum, which one would never suppose, approaching Albury House from the front, to be anywhere near its prosperous neighbourhood. The slum street was the playground of the multitude of children from the tall burrows of houses, an uncomfortable playground this evening, when the wind swept round corners and raised the dust in little eddies and whirls, and with a great commotion drove before it the paper it had stripped off the hoarding round the corner. However, the children made their plays contentedly in the midst of the dust, and were swept up hastily by stunted elder sisters when a jingling hansom came cheerfully through Seaman Street on its way to more favoured localities. There was

a barrel-organ grinding out its abject tune before the public-house at the corner, and two or three dirty little girls danced to its strains, lifting their skirts as daintily as any ballerina of the foot-lights. Seaman Street was one of those tireless London streets that never sleep.

Though the evening was so overcast, it was densely hot. Every window in Seaman Street gasped for air, and if Beatrice Challoner were so minded she could have gazed across the handbreadth of space between into the melancholy interiors. There, by one window, was a woman sewing, while her foot incessantly rocked a cradle. A young man, apparently asleep, lay on a broken-backed couch a little farther within the shadows. It was the artisan in the last stages of consumption, whose harrowing night cough had often reached her wakeful ears across the narrow thoroughfare.

By another window was a group of pallid girls. They were working overtime at making cheap jackets. A more fortunate sister high up in the attic of another house was attiring herself in finery before going

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

out. One house was a laundry, through the windows of which, all day, had smoked a fume of hot soap-suds. The laundry-workers, mostly French, had departed one by one, to take the air, or had been fetched by their young men, very smart in straw hats and flannels. A deaf and dumb child sat with a lonely quietude at another window, and nursed a doll, and looked down curiously on the happier children in the street.

Seaman Street had been awake since four o'clock in the morning, and would not close its eyes, though the chemist's shop and the public-house both closed theirs at a comparatively respectable hour, till two hours after midnight. Its noise and its dust came up to Beatrice Challoner's little room under the roof. If she excluded these she excluded her only chance of a mouthful of air. The dust littered everything. No matter how she strove to keep her room fresh, the dust drifted in, first coating the window-panes, and then descending in a gray film on bed and toilet-table and desk and chair.

This special July evening Miss Challoner

was feeling as if the dust had entered the pores of her skin, as it had penetrated her eyes and her throat. Yet her own room was quiet. If she had gone downstairs to the drawing-room, with its oleographs and antimacassars, and its general air of un-homeliness, she might have been pounced upon by Mrs. Ransom, or the Misses Fothergill, or old Mr. Nayman, who had insisted on teaching her whist and was so cross when she made a blunder. The light in the room was failing, and her novel was dull, and her head ached. She longed for freshness and dew and scent ; but since she could not have these, at least she would have her solitude.

A tap at the door interrupted her.

‘If you please, miss,’ said Mary, the parlour-maid, ‘there’s a gentleman for you, miss, and I’ve put him in the parlour as Mrs. Brown’s out, and the drawing-room so stuffy with all them old ca—, ladies, I mean, miss, over their books and cards.’

‘Thank you, Mary,’ said Beatrice, taking the card, on which she read ‘Mr. Arthur Strangways.’

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

Mary tripped off blithely to the lower regions to inform cook and Susan and John that old Mr. Strangways' son as ever was had come visiting Miss Challoner. Beatrice had a good deal of sympathy, if she had only known it, from the domestics, who found her sweet-spoken, and in the way of giving trouble very different from the old ladies who formed Mrs. Brown's permanent *clientèle*.

It was remarkable that, as she read the name on the card, she blushed vividly, and felt a queer excitement not wholly pleasant or unpleasant. Whenever she had thought of Arthur Strangways since the day of her accident—and she had thought a good many times—it was with conflicting emotions. How brutal, how cruel, how unpardonable his conduct had been in the beginning of the day! How he had wronged and misrepresented her, and put her to sore shame and humiliation. But then, on the other hand, how kind and clever, and how repentant he had been after her accident. She remembered his faltering appeal to her that she would

forgive, and allow him to begin over again. No, she could not hate him, could not regard him as an enemy.

She waited a minute or two in the dusky room after the maid had left her, and then went downstairs with a very slow and stately step. Her usual pallor had returned by the time she reached Mrs. Brown's parlour, and Arthur Strangeways' first thought was of how sadly beautiful she looked in the dreary London gloaming. When he took her extended hand it felt very cold.

'You have been well,' he said, with anxious solicitude, 'since you left Garden-hurst? You should not have left after so short a convalescence.'

Then he faltered and felt wretchedly guilty, remembering what it was that had made it difficult for her to accept the hospitality of his home.

'I am quite well,' she said, gently, 'but the summer is very hot in town, and I find the long twilights a little sad.'

They talked on indifferent topics for a while. Then he found that, difficult as it

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

was to speak, it was intolerable to spend the time in uttering conventionalities.

‘Miss Challoner,’ he said, impulsively, ‘I resolved when I was coming here this evening to tell you how bitterly sorry I have been for my conduct to you. It was not alone the accident, but all that went before. I wish to heavens I had broken a limb myself. It was I who stood in need of punishment.’

‘You were very unjust to me,’ said the girl, simply ; but somehow the words sounded more like a pardon than an accusation.

‘Beatrice, Beatrice !’ cried the young man, wildly. ‘Don’t you understand it? Put me in sackcloth and ashes if you will, after I have spoken, but let me speak now. Don’t you know it was because I loved you from the first minute I set eyes on your beauty? That it was because I was mad with jealousy of you, and rage against your contempt of me? I was a brute, an unspeakable brute, but it was the brutality of a man towards the woman he loves, and who stands out against him.’

He stopped and tried to see what expression was in her averted face, but the room was full of shadows.

‘You are not angry, Beatrice?’ he said.

‘No,’ she replied, very low; ‘but you are too sudden.’

‘Is that all, my queen?’ he said, laughing out of his excitement and happy relief. ‘Then I will give you time to get used to me. I will go by little steps. I will not ask you now to love me, but only to forgive me, and let me start with a fair chance.’

‘I have forgiven you,’ she said. ‘I forgave you that day of my accident, when you took care of me.’

He wondered at her calm. Another girl would have been all blushes and tremors, but somehow he did not feel that the calm boded ill for his success.

‘But I have something to forgive you,’ he said again. ‘Why did you not come to tea with me that evening I asked you and Dolly?’

‘I did not believe you could care. I thought you only asked me to satisfy yourself.’

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

‘*Care !* Why, the hour I spent listening for your footstep on the stairs was an hour of purgatory ; and afterwards I hoped you would write.’

‘I tried to, but I did not know what to say.’

‘Presently I am going to forgive you. Not yet though, not till you have learned to love me.’

She made no reply. Neither of them thought of the conventions, or of what Mrs. Brown would think if she came in and found them sitting in a room, the dusk of which the horn of the summer moon did little to illumine.

‘You will have to learn your lesson soon, Beatrice, and give me your answer soon. I can’t leave you in Mrs. Brown’s all during the summer.’

‘What would they think at Garden-hurst?’

It was his turn to blush, and he blushed ingenuously.

‘They will love you, as they were ready to do before.’

‘But your father?’

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

There was a troubled note in her voice which revealed how things stood to him.

‘Dear old dad, he will be resigned after a time. He is the dearest old fellow, Beatrice ; I never knew how dear till after your accident.’

‘Yes, there is no one like him,’ said the girl, simply.

‘Did you know that Fred offered to kick me?—I jolly well deserved it—as your champion.’

‘Dear boy !’ with a sudden, sweet laugh. ‘He proposed to me, though I don’t know if I ought to betray his confidence. Offered even to give up the ’Varsity and his chance of a blue for my sake.’

‘Impudent young beggar ! What did you say?’

‘Put before him what he was resigning for my sake, whereupon he faltered, and was in his inmost heart relieved that for prudential motives I declined.’

‘I daresay he’ll want to kick me again for all that when he knows.’

He looked keenly at her glimmering

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

profile. Then he laughed triumphantly and suddenly.

‘Beatrice, Beatrice!’ he cried, ‘do you know that you as well as I seem to take everything for granted? For ten minutes back we have talked as if you had not yet your lesson to learn. Have you learnt it, Beatrice? And if not, will you not learn it now? Don’t keep me an hour out of Paradise.’

‘You will think I am too facile,’ she said, coming to him as willingly as any lover could desire.

CHAPTER X

THE Arthur Strangways who arrived at the station for Gardenhurst one evening about a month later was a very different person from the young gentleman who had come down that June Saturday bent on making everybody as uncomfortable as possible. This was a beamy, sunshiny, jolly-looking youth, who had excited the kindly admiration of half a dozen matrons on the little run between Victoria and Oxenden. Still the joyousness of his expression was not quite uncomplicated. Any one watching his rapid changes of expression as he sat smoking his very excellent cigar, and looking out of the window at the Kentish hop gardens as they sped swiftly by, would have detected very often a half-comic look of perplexity, as if the young gentleman were

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

in rather an amusing fix, and did not quite see his way to getting out of it.

He was not expected at Gardenhurst, and when he had alighted at Oxenden Station he refused cheerily the offer of the porter to run up his bag for him on the truck.

‘I’m well able to carry it, Simmons,’ he said, ‘and it will keep the muscles in training.’

‘Ay, ay, Master Arthur,’ said Simmons, who had known him from childhood ; ‘and may it be long before you’re a heavy-weight yourself, sir. The squire’s been up to town to-day. Came down on the 4.15, and the lady from the Pines, who was here after a parcel when the train came in, gave him a lift. Fine healthy gentleman, the squire, sir. He takes the road any day of the week just like yourself.’

‘Well, good evening, Simmons,’ said Arthur, cutting short the garrulous porter. ‘Remember me to Mrs. Simmons. I trust she and the kids are well.’

‘Quite well, sir, thank ’ee.’ And then to himself, admiringly, as Arthur swung up

the road—‘That’s a fine pleasant spoken young gentleman. The very moral of the squire as ever was.’

Presently Arthur turned into a grass-grown bridle-path by the wood’s edge, where the pheasants scurried from under his feet as he walked. Here, where no one saw him but the birds, he put down his bag for a few minutes and leant against the bole of a beech-tree. There he indulged in a fit of laughter so hearty that it made the tears run down his face.

‘Here am I,’ he said aloud, ‘the happiest beggar in the world, but in the extraordinary fix of having to tell my father I’ve stolen a march on him. It’s rough on the poor dad, so it is. Only I believe Mrs. Mellor will comfort him. And there’s Fred. What will Fred do? Carry out his threat of kicking me most likely. By Jove, I wish I’d broken it to them, so I do.’

He looked down soberly at the bag at his feet.

‘Oh, I say,’ he said to himself, ‘better be getting it over ; then it would be time enough to laugh ; but you’re in for a bad

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

quarter of an hour most likely, my fine fellow. However, it's all in the day's work for Beatrice, my peerless Beatrice. Here, come on'—to his bag—'I won't have more than time to dress as it is.'

But as he shouldered the bag he became aware of Fred standing in the midst of the path, and gloomily regarding him.

'Oh, Lord,' he said to himself. 'The fun's going to begin!' Then aloud, 'Hullo, youngster! Not gone back to school yet? Pheasants seem pretty lively, eh? And how are the dad and the sisters?'

But the boy still kept up his implacable look.

'What, not forgiven me, Fred? I thought we were going to let bygones be bygones.'

'I thought it was you,' said the boy, stonily. 'No one else would be making a laughing jackass of himself in the midst of the wood.'

'Hang it all, youngster, don't be so unfriendly.'

'I'll be a deuced sight more unfriendly. I haven't forgotten Miss Challoner as easily

Oh, What a Plague is Love!

as you seem to have done. Have you come back for that kicking? Because it's been saving up for you.'

'Don't kick me, boy; she wouldn't like it.'

'*She?* Who is she? Not Miss Challoner?'

'Yes, Miss Challoner.'

'*You* haven't seen her?'—incredulously.

'I have, and she's forgiven me.'

'She told you so?'

'Yes.'

'Well, of all the mean, low sweeps! to go getting round a girl like that. And I wanted to do something for her sake, because I somehow let her slip through my fingers when she was here. Let her think I set her below cricket, and no girl likes to think a fellow does that. Did she say anything about me?'

Fred's curiosity was getting the better of his enmity.

'Lots. Said you were the decentest boy alive, and a lot of other things which I'll tell you presently. Well, are we going to be friends?'

‘I suppose so,’ said the boy. ‘If the lady has forgiven you, there’s no quarrel left for me to take up, is there?’

‘Clearly not. And now, take a turn at the bag, dear old fellow.’

The rest of the walk was purely amicable, though Arthur remembered once or twice with a qualm that Fred did not yet know the extent of his perfidy. However, Fred was clearly not the first person to be told.

After dinner, his father, with the new-born affection which had sprung up between them, came and put his hand on Arthur’s shoulder.

‘Come and smoke out of doors, my boy ; it is a shame to sit under the mahogany on such an evening.’

Arthur followed his father to the terrace, with a sense that the evil hour could not much longer be postponed. After they had chosen and lit their cigars they began pacing up and down. Duke seemed distressed. When Arthur began discussing some of the affairs of the estate, he waived it off as he might have done a gnat.

‘To-morrow morning, dear boy, you

can put me through my facings. Not now. I prefer to talk of other things.'

'The deuce you do,' said the young man to himself. 'Well, it's no use shivering on the brink. Here goes for the plunge!' He drew a long breath and began—

'Dad.'

'Yes, my boy.'

'Do you know what it is to have something on your mind?'

'I do indeed, my boy,'—with extreme sympathy.

'Dad, do you know I've come to the conclusion that women, while they cause us our greatest happiness, put us into more awkward corners than any other thing whatsoever in this world?'

'Quite true, my lad,' said Duke, with conviction.

'Dad, do you know what it is to change your mind utterly, shamelessly, hopelessly, about a woman? To desire passionately this month what you decried last, to find that your happiness really lay in what had seemed your bane? Do you know what it is to make a *volte-face* like that?'

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

‘I do, my lad, too well. But how did you know?’

‘Know what?’

‘That Susan Mellor has consented to make me the happiest man alive.’

The young man opened his mouth to peal out a roar of Homeric laughter, but fortunately remembered in time, and pulled hard at his cigar instead.

‘Dear old dad ! I’m so glad. Why, it’s the ideal arrangement.’

‘I’m delighted that you think so, dear boy,’ breathed Duke, evidently vastly relieved.

‘And the girls ? How do they take it ?’

‘Well, to tell you the truth, I haven’t told the dear girls yet. I hope they’ll take it kindly because it’s got to be. Why, I’ve the wedding-ring in my pocket. I went up to Streeter’s to-day and bought that at the same time as a hoop of sapphires and diamonds for her dear finger. She met me at the station and drove me here. She was as pleased with her new ring as if she were only seventeen.’

‘You’re not going to do anything rash,

dad—no runaway matches or anything of that sort?’

‘Well, we thought of a special license, and doing the thing out of hand. It would be pleasanter if the girls cut up rough.’

‘They won’t, take my word for it. I’ll see that they don’t.’

‘I’ll be glad to have your presence and support when I announce it, Arthur.’

‘You needn’t, dear old dad. You just walk across and see your sweetheart. I daresay she’s waiting for you, if one only knew. You’ll find them ready with kisses and hugs of congratulation when you come back.’

‘You think so, my lad? Well, God bless you. You’re a good, kind-hearted lad. Susan did say she’d expect me to look in after dinner. By the way, the thing that makes me feel awkward’—Duke blushed like a school-girl—‘is that the girls may think me a little, ahem, inconstant, because of my infatuation for that sweet girl, Miss Challoner. I see now the folly of it, but when she refused me I was really cut up, deucedly cut up, I can tell you.’

‘Poor old dad !’

‘I don’t think you quite appreciated Miss Challoner, my boy ; but I assure you that lady was as good as she was beautiful. Susan has promised to be kind to her when we’re married. Susan’s a woman in ten thousand. No petty jealousy or little-mindedness about her.’

‘Well, now, dad, that you’ve made your confession, I want you to listen to mine.’

‘Your confession, my boy ! What can you have to confess ? Why, not one of you ever gave me a minute’s trouble from the time you were born.’

‘Well, the truth is, dad, that I’ve been seeing a good deal of Miss Challoner in town. I thought I ought to, you know, after spraining her poor little ankle through my fault. And the result is——’

‘No !’ unbelievably.

‘The result is, dad, that I came down to-day to break the intelligence to you that we’ve agreed to take each other for good and all.’

‘You have, hey, you sly young dog ! And I’ve been thinking I had behaved in

a deuced ungentlemanly way to the young lady in consoling myself so soon, and been calling myself no end of fickle dogs.'

'Dad!' said the young fellow, emphatically, 'I think there's a pair of us.'

Duke burst out laughing in a way that proved the relationship between him and his laughter-loving son. When he had somewhat recovered he was pushed down the terrace steps to carry his wonderful news to Mrs. Mellor.

Arthur went into the house, still chuckling, by the long drawing-room windows. He found his sisters in the room, and sat down, selecting the most comfortable chair with unerring masculine instinct.

'Arthur,' said Frances, gravely, 'I'm glad you've left the dad outside, for there's something on my mind, on Sophia's mind too, though not on dear Doll's, for she wouldn't have agreed with us even if she'd known anything about it.'

'Oh, Lord,' said the young fellow, 'more confessions!'

'A confession that involves you as well

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

as us,' Frances went on. 'You remember all you said to us about that Miss Challoner in June?'

'Don't remind me of it.'

'But I must, for, as it proved, we were all wrong. Why, the dad proposed to her before she left, and she refused him point-blank. He owned up after she had gone, when he found what we had got in our heads. And I'm very much afraid the poor girl guessed our suspicions, for she was so anxious to be gone, and we've heard neither tale nor tidings of her since she left. Now, Sophia and I have been wretched over the injustice we did her, and we have been wondering whether we could induce her to come back to us, and, if so, whether it would be quite safe to have her.'

'How do you mean *safe*?'

'Well, she might change her mind about the dad.'

'Devil a bit of it! Mrs. Mellor'll see to that. At the present moment the dad has got his wedding-ring wrapped up in tissue-paper in his left waistcoat pocket, unless, indeed, he's trying it on Mrs.'

Mellor's finger, which is likely enough, as he's gone over there.'

'You're jesting, Arthur,' broke from three pairs of feminine lips.

'Never was more serious in my life. And if you'll take my advice, and are anxious to prevent the scandal of an elopement at the dad's age, you'll just tell him you're delighted when he comes back this evening.'

'Well, after all, it might be very much worse,' said Sophia, emphatically ; and after a time all three sisters were ready to put aside their prejudices in the matter, and accept Mrs. Mellor, the more so as she had her own big house close at hand, and was not likely to desire a transference of her kingdom to Gardenhurst.

'By the way,' added Arthur, when the hubbub had somewhat subsided, 'there is a second reason for your minds being at rest about Miss Challoner. She's already engaged, and to me. We hope to bring it off on the same day that Dolly becomes Mrs. Fairfax. We'd better have the dad and Mrs. Mellor the same day, and Hubert

Oh, What a Plague is Love !

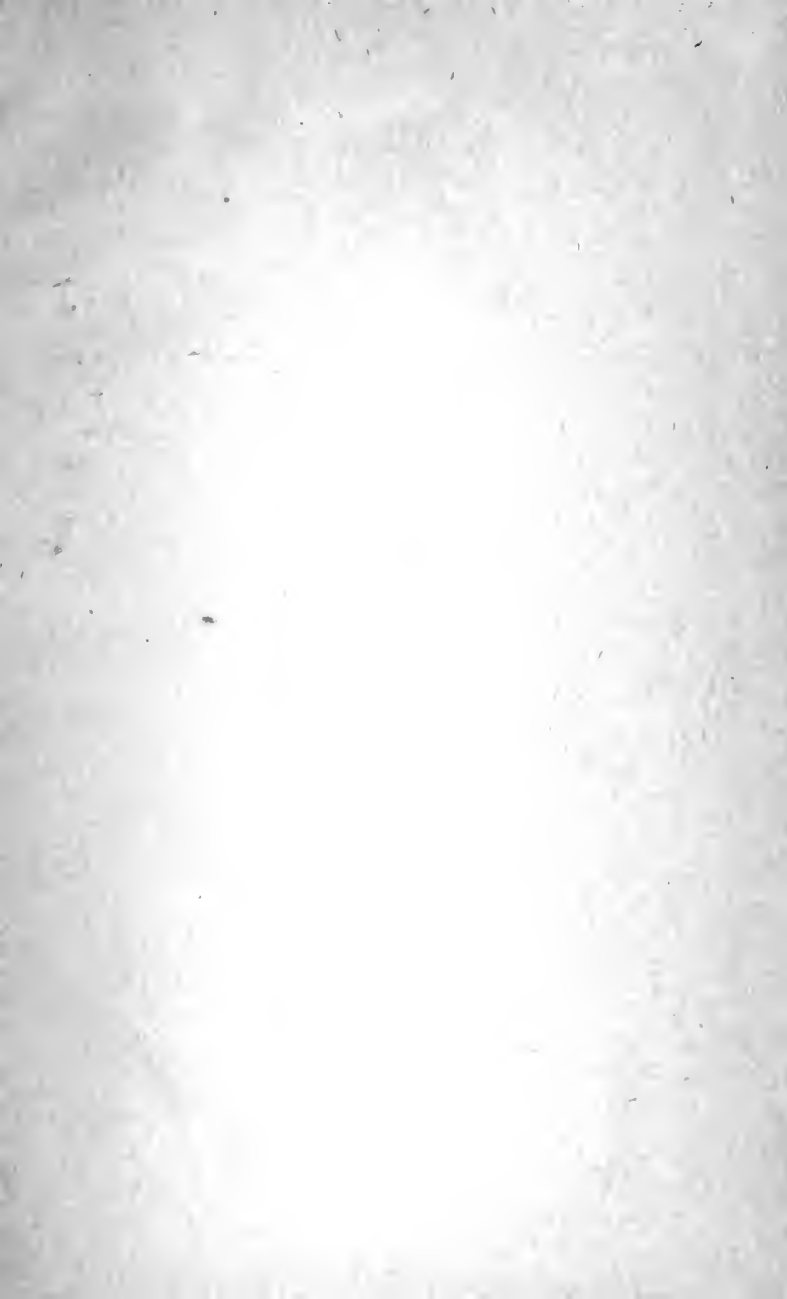
can come down from Oxford and give us all away.'

The night descended at Gardenhurst on a general peace. Even Fred had come and offered Arthur slightly sullen congratulations.

'It's a woman's privilege to change her mind, I know,' he said ; 'but if it hadn't been for the cricket it's not you would be the happy man to-night.'

THE END





UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

REC'D LD-ERT
SEP 28 1971

Form L9-25m-8,'46 (9852)444

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 000 370 355 0

